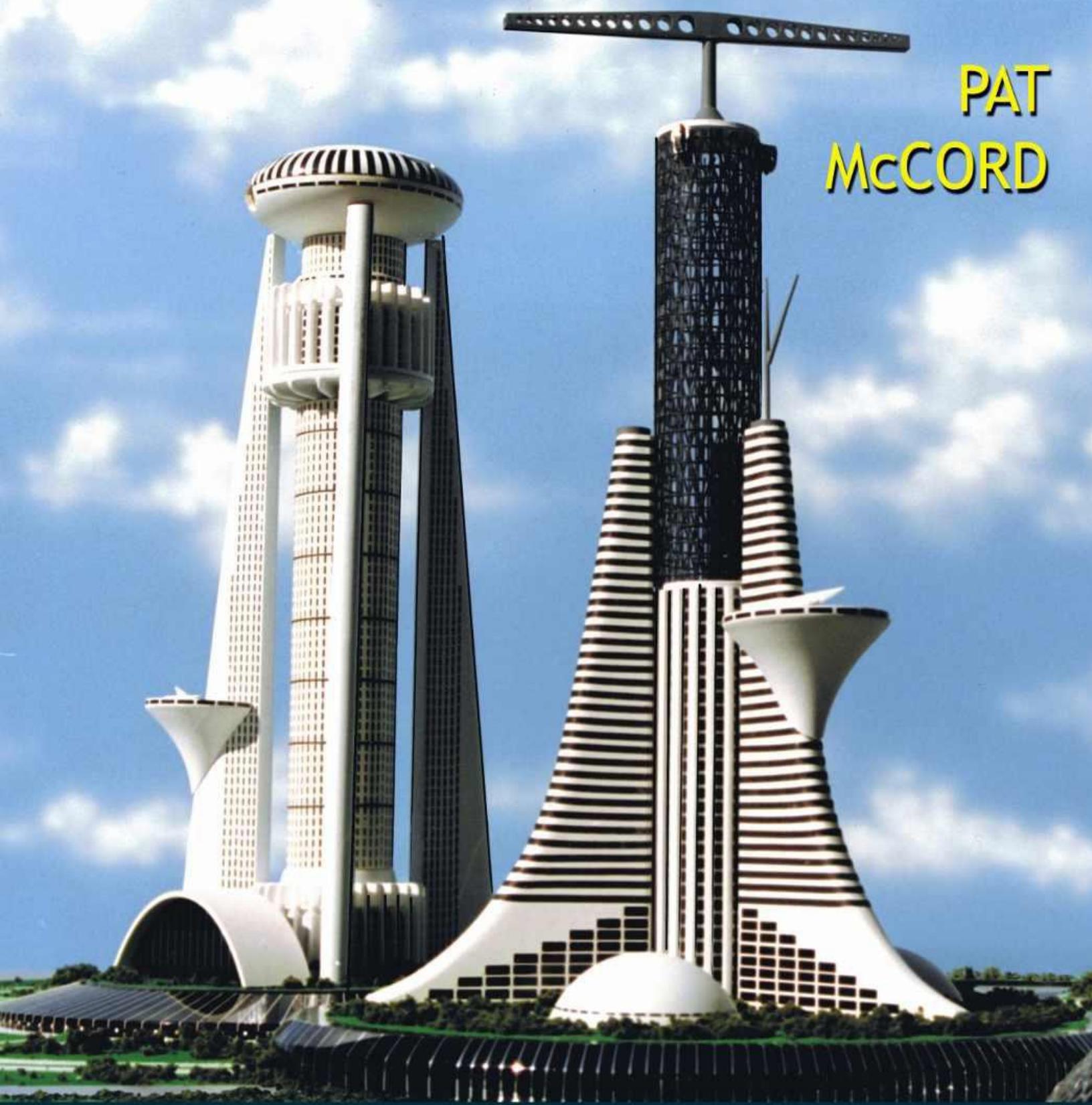


THE RINGS OF VENUS

PAT
McCORD



In cooperation with Jacque Fresco and
Roxanne Meadows, co-founders of The Venus Project.

The Rings of Venus

By Pat McCord

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Kindle Edition

Dedication

For Roxanne Meadows and Jacque Fresco,
the courageous visionaries who saw the future
and founded The Venus Project
for all of us.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Jacque Fresco and Roxanne Meadows for taking me inside the world of The Venus Project where I lived, through my writing, for the time it took to craft this book.

Although the plot for *The Rings of Venus* is mostly my own, the technology, designs and philosophies are exclusively those of Jacque Fresco.

Through three visits, myriad phone calls and scores of emails, I was able to immerse myself in this incredibly hopeful new vision for a sustainable world and bring it to life in a way that will be with me for years to come. Without their generosity of time, resources and ideas, the book simply would not have been possible.

Thank you also to the good people at EPCOT who showed me how hydroponics might be able to feed a hungry planet in the future.

And thank you to the many people who read and reacted to early versions of this book. Particular thanks to Pete Mauser for his sensitive and expert editing after each iteration.

CHAPTER ONE

The Hammonds hadn't heard from Dad in three days—okay by Nick. No yelling about homework, no looks sliding his way at the dinner table. He wasn't even worried, though he might have been if he'd known what was coming, but for now he had other things on his mind. Like getting the chores done so he could do something fun for a change.

He pushed the vacuum into the space behind a stuffed blue chair and cringed as it sucked up something rock hard.

"Nick, do you have to run the vacuum now?" his mother shouted over the noise. "I won't hear the phone." She pulled back her hair and clipped it, as if getting it away from her ears would help.

"Okay, okay!" Nick turned the vacuum off and pushed it upright. If it was full of gravel, he'd worry about it later.

As usual nothing was going right. If anyone saw Nick with a vacuum cleaner, he'd be laughed out of school. It wasn't even his chore—his sister Erika had traded for a week's worth of garbage duty. If he could just get it over with, he could beat it to Hank's to watch a DVD.

"I'll do it tomorrow," he called, not that his mother was paying any attention to him. He could tell by the look on her face that she was between worried and mad.

Anyway, when his father was submerged in business, sometimes he didn't surface for weeks. So it wasn't like this had never happened before.

This time he had gone to Florida on business and hadn't called home since he got there. He hadn't answered his cell phone either. That part might be unusual, but still...

Leaving the vacuum in the middle of the living room, Nick raced back upstairs to check for e-mail before escaping to Hank's. He had sent a note to a girl from school over an hour ago, hoping she'd changed her mind about hating him (she'd never actually said she hated him—that was her friend Amber's word).

Anyway, there wasn't anything he could do about having freckles,

which seemed to be her complaint. He clicked the mouse to find one message, and his heart did a bump thinking it was from Gena. *Click.* It wasn't—it was from Hank who usually just sent text messages.

Hey, dude. Flap your feet over here and don't forget the \$ for nourishment.

Hank didn't care about freckles. Nick let out a laugh and was about to hit Reply when—*plink*—another message came through. This one was from Dad, to the whole family. So at least he had logged on to his laptop.

Ann, Nick, Erika, I've discovered something amazing. You'll find out about it when you get here.

Nick's pulse shifted into high gear. "When you get here?" His father had included access codes for three, one-way airline tickets from Seattle to Orlando and a strange note at the bottom:

J. Daniels will pick you up at the airport. Bring an open mind. Trust me, G.

"Oh, wow!" Nick yelped. 'G' was Dad, the amazing Gil Hammond. Lately he hadn't thought about anything but business, which meant the word 'vacation' had been scrubbed from the Hammond vocabulary.

Plus, when people told you to have an open mind it was usually because they knew you weren't going to like something. But a trip, a week after he'd started back to school—what was not to like? Nick printed off a copy and raced out of his room, nearly running into his eleven-year-old sister.

"Move it, Erika. We're gonna see Dad." He'd already forgotten about Gena.

Erika's footsteps clunked after him down the stairs.

Mom had gone back into her room off the kitchen where she was working on a new painting for a Pacific Redi-Lawn brochure; obviously she hadn't seen the message. A dozen paintbrushes grew out of a can on a wooden file cabinet next to her easel. The can teetered.

"Nick..." She caught the can just in time.

"It's from Dad."

"Oh!" His mother wiped her hand on her big shirt and took the

paper. She almost always wore sweatpants and one of Dad's old shirts. This one was streaked with blue and green paint.

"What's it say?" Erika asked, crowding in.

Nick liked that he was the only one who knew. Any time he could be the star over the brilliant Erika, it was a good day. "He wants us to meet him in Florida," he told her, "and you know what's in Florida—*everything!* Disney World, Epcot, Sea World."

Nick could almost feel Erika's breath suck in.

"He wants us there in *two days!* Our brochure is mailing in a week." Mom turned the paper over. "I don't get it. He doesn't say a word about the merger."

Who cares? Nick thought, but in fact that did seem weird. Pacific Redi-Lawn, Dad's newest company, was hooking up with another lawn company in Florida—they grew grass for people who didn't want to bother with it themselves, then installed it like strips of carpet. With two companies, Dad would make a lot more money, one of the few things that got him excited these days.

With a determined look on her face, Mom grabbed her cell phone off the file cabinet. She touched in the numbers, waited, then looked up at the ceiling as if Dad were hovering there. "Gill, will you *please* answer?" Then she thumbed in a text message and hit Send.

Finally, Mom flipped her phone closed and set it down. "He can't be *that* busy." She folded her arms across her chest, seeming to think it over, then concluded, "Nick, you barely made it into ninth grade, we can't go anywhere now. Besides, isn't it hurricane season out there?"

She didn't say anything about school to Erika, who had actually memorized the periodic chart of elements during the summer.

"Nothing happens in ninth grade," Nick argued, and he meant it, intellectually at least. Girls were another matter.

"I could miss a whole year and it wouldn't make a bit of difference," he said. Except he'd be happier. "Anyway, I need a break."

"Nice try, Nick. You should be a lawyer." Mom always said that. But she took a deep breath and ran her hands down her shirt. "He probably feels guilty—we never go anywhere." She sighed. "A little sun

would be nice.”

Nick doubted if his father felt guilty about anything, but it had been raining in Skagit, the town where they lived near Seattle, for three weeks straight.

Nick slid a smile toward Erika. They were going to Florida! What luck, he thought. Could something finally be going his way? No Mrs. Koster with her runny nose. And no Paul-the-Neanderthal. He’d miss Hank and his screwball messages, but Gena could just wonder about him; girls weren’t really his thing anyway.

“Maybe he’s taking us to Universal,” Nick thought out loud. “That would be ‘something amazing.’” In one swoop he forgave his father for every disagreement they’d ever had. Besides, it might be okay to see him somewhere besides the sod fields.

When Mom finally got through to dad, it was nine o’clock Sunday night. Nick had convinced Erika that they should go ahead and pack, thinking positive for a change. He stood at the head of the stairs, just out of Mom’s sight, where he could hear her side of the conversation. He could hardly breathe, for fear something would ruin his escape from school.

“Come on, Gil, what’s with the one-way tickets? I have to know when we’ll be back.” Then silence while Dad talked on the other end. “But, his math teacher sent another note home. He could be flunking.”

Nick cringed. They were talking about him. *But we’re going, aren’t we?* he wanted to scream down the stairs. *I swear I’ll make up the math later.*

Then Mom said, “I want to know what’s going on. Last time you did this, we ended up with a sod farm... I know but... Trust you? Gil! Okay, okay we need to have a talk as soon as we get there... All right... we’ll see you tomorrow.”

Nick did an inaudible scream, “Yay!” and added a little jig. When Erika came out of her room, he whispered, “We’re on. We’re really going.”

But what waited when they arrived in Florida was no vacation... It was more like going to another planet.

CHAPTER TWO

At 4:30 the next morning, Nick's mother was already on edge. "I don't have any decent summer clothes," she complained. "Nick, be sure to pack your flip-flops... and those blue shorts I bought you this summer."

What Nick had was too much mother. His aunt had even called him and Erika helicopter kids—because they always had a mother hovering. Dad didn't do that, probably because he was always out in the sod fields or gone.

On the ride to the Seattle-Tacoma airport in the shuttle, Nick stomach sloshed around, mixing equal amounts of excitement and nervousness.

"I'm not a bit comfortable flying into oblivion," his mother kept saying. "I don't know why he couldn't just meet us."

Even Nick suspected something weird was going on. But why wouldn't his dad just tell them what it was?

Nick took first shift in the window seat, and the plane took off only seven minutes late, bouncing its way to thirty-two thousand feet. He tightened his seatbelt, pretending it didn't bother him a bit. Finally, the 757 leveled off and he let himself look down at the mountains, then neat squares of farmland.

For the next hour, he had plenty of time to think. Mostly he pictured Mrs. Koster's math class with one happily empty desk, and he thought about his father and what might happen in Florida.

Three years ago Dad had announced that he didn't want to teach horticulture at the university any more and was going to start a sod business.

"Sod?" Nick remembered Mom asking, as if she couldn't believe her ears. "You mean grass?"

"Instant lawn," Dad said, "No one has time to wait for seed to grow anymore." Then he talked about how he wouldn't have to put up with campus politics if he had his own business, how much more money he could make growing grass, and how everything was going to be perfect from then on.

But it never worked that way—their new house on Pinewood Drive had a three-car garage, so what? Tractors were stuffed into two of them. They hadn't gotten rich yet, either, and now all Dad thought about was *The Business*.

He had even started bugging Nick about one day taking over, like that would ever happen! It had been better when his father talked about the xylem and phloem of plants, and showed him cells dividing in the microscope.

Now that Pacific-Redi Lawn was going to be a lot bigger, Dad was getting what he wanted, but it sure wasn't what Nick wanted. No surprise there. And it wasn't just because Nick was being negative either.

It was just that things never worked out the way people promised—an absolute fact. Mom was right—something about this didn't make sense. For starters, why was Dad letting Nick and Erika skip school?

Erika leaned over him to look out the window. "Where are all the towns?" she asked. "It doesn't look overcrowded down there to me."

Nick didn't bother to answer. He traded places with her—the window seat gave him the willies anyway—and let Mom think he was being extra nice.

One bag of miniature pretzels and five hours later they finally landed in Orlando where the Hammonds followed the signs to Baggage Claim with their carry-ons. They had no other luggage, but this seemed like the best place to look for J. Daniels, the guy who was supposed to be meeting them.

Nick took a deep breath and forced his mood up a notch. At least he wasn't in school; maybe it didn't matter why his father had sent the tickets.

Erika veered toward the gift shop. During the flight, she had been counting out stacks of quarters on her tray table and discovered she had eleven dollars to spend.

"Not now," Mom grumbled, and they kept walking toward the carousel where they collected their baggage.

"Look," Nick said, relieved. "That must be us." A man was slouching against a pillar holding a sign that said *Hammond* in hand-

written letters. Dressed in black slacks and a wrinkled white shirt, he looked like he'd been sleeping in a corner somewhere.

Mom gave her bag a hoist and made her way to where he was standing. Nick and his sister followed. "Ann Hammond?" she asked.

The man handed her a piece of paper. "Yes, Ma'am." He snorted through a thin, bony nose. "John Daniels. I'm instructed to take you and the kids there to Venus."

A Disney place, Nick reasoned cheerfully. The hotel maybe. Mom's eyebrow went up, but she didn't say anything.

Daniels reached for their bags and headed for the automatic doors, obviously expecting them to follow. A wall of warm air hit them as soon as the doors opened. Palm fronds rattled in the breeze along the perimeter of the parking lot.

Erika felt the warn air, waving her hand back and forth. Nick checked his cell phone and sent a quick text to Hank. *Dude, how's the potato-wiener casserole?* and put his phone back in his pocket.

At the curb sat a long black car with gold trim. An actual limo. Mom did a double take when Daniels opened the door and tossed in their bags. Wow, she mouthed to Nick, as if this made up for everything.

Smiling now, she ushered Erika into the wide back seat, then she and Nick followed. The interior was huge and black. Was this really a limo, or was it a hearse?

When they had settled with their coats in their laps, the man looked in the rearview mirror at them. "Just relax, we'll be there in a little over two hours."

"Two hours?" Mom asked, her mood obviously right back to square one. "Are you sure?"

"Give or take," Daniels said. "Venus is 115 miles out."

This is why I'm so negative, Nick thought. They weren't going to Disney World, or Universal either! Dad wasn't even here and he'd already ruined everything.

"I shoulda worn shorts," Erika complained.

"Two hours." Mom slumped back against the seat and folded her arms.

Hotels and business parks gave way to gas stations and roadside stands, then pasture land, dozens of tiny lakes, and citrus orchards. Nick leaned forward hopefully. He didn't know for sure where they were, but as far as he could tell there was nothing out here, amazing or not.

Almost exactly two hours into a boring ride, after gazing out the window at rows of orange trees moving past, Nick spotted tall white cones clustered together in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by a lot of green.



Off to one side were dozens of thin windmills with sun glinting off of big, white blades.

Nick's pulse quickened as he pushed the button to roll down the window. From this distance, the place had the clean, sleek look of a city in TomorrowLand, his kind of place.

“Is that it?” Erika asked.

“Yep,” John Daniels said. “How much time will you be doing here?”

Daniels made it sound like a prison. “What is this place exactly?” Nick asked.

“You’ll see,” Daniels said into the mirror. In his rumpled shirt he looked like he’d gotten a lot more Ds in school than Nick ever had—a loser, Dad would call him.

“Look, Mr. ... Daniels.” Mom leaned forward and gripped the back of the leather seat. “We’ve played along so far. How about telling us what this is all about?”

“I’ve been instructed—”

“Let me guess,” Mom said. “You’ve been instructed not to tell us anything.”

“Yes, ma’am, something like that.”

Oh-oh, Nick thought. Negative or not, something was definitely up. Maybe something not so good. He was beginning to get the same feeling he’d had when the bulldozers rolled onto their property in Skagit and pulled down perfectly good trees to make way for sod.

Erika pressed her nose to the window. “I’ll bet they’ve got a water park, maybe two.”

A water park would be okay, but it wouldn’t be ‘something amazing,’ like Dad had promised. Mom scowled and didn’t say another word as they turned off the main highway and traveled through the orange groves for several miles.

Then suddenly, there it was. Venus was hidden between the groves and scrubby-looking palm trees.

All Nick could see of it as they pulled up was a jungle so perfect it looked like a computer-generated image. No walls, no gates, no bellman and not a single sign to let anyone know where they were.

Already parked outside was a van letting off a woman with two kids—an overweight boy about Nick’s age, and an older girl. The boy was carrying a small metal box with marble-sized holes in the sides. He glanced at the limo and rolled his eyes.

Nick had been ready to smile, but changed his mind. “Jerk,” he muttered and got out of the car to get a better look at Venus. Mom and Erika followed.

Through the tangle of vines and flowering bushes, Nick saw bananas, little brown balls that he guessed were figs, and green fruit hanging off the trees. To the right snaked a narrow, mulched path that seemed to go nowhere except into more jungle.

The kid and his family headed in that direction and were soon out of sight. Not all Neanderthals lived in Skagit, Nick thought. Maybe Venus was big enough that he wouldn't see him again.

Mom shaded her eyes as if to sharpen her focus. Obviously, she was hoping to see Dad come walking out of the jungle. "It looks like some sort of nursery to me," she commented. "Where are we meeting my husband?" Daniels was busy getting their bags and didn't answer.

"Maybe Dad sold them some Redi-Lawn," Erika said.

It could be true. Nick's father never missed an opportunity to sign up a new customer.

His sister didn't seem to care why they were here. She squinted up at the sun and said, "Look at that, it really is a ball," as if being from the Pacific Northwest, she'd never seen the sun before.

"Erika! Stop that," Mom warned. "You're going to burn your eyeballs."

"No, I'm not," Erika said, rubbing her eyes.

Then without even saying goodbye or explaining, John Daniels got back into the limo and pulled away. The Hammonds' bags sat lined up on the gravel. Nick grabbed his and watched the back of the long car kick up dust on its way out.

"How do you like that?" Mom grumbled. "Don't I get a copy of the bill? He could have shown us to Check-in or something."

She flipped open her cell phone, checked for messages for the tenth time, then started poking at the keys.

"Your dad had better have an explanation for this—a really good explanation." She scowled and put away the phone.

For at least a full minute everyone just stood there, checking the area, trying to figure it out.

"Well... come on," Mom said finally. "We can't just stand here. That path must lead somewhere."

Tossing his jacket over his shoulder, Nick breathed in the warm air and led the way onto the path. He would find out soon enough what was going on. So, this wasn't what he had expected, so what?

Anything would be better than the brain decay they called school back home. Nick squared his shoulders, deciding there was no point in being negative, and pushed low palm fronds out of the way.

They hadn't gone far when a female voice came in clear from a speaker somewhere near the ground. "Welcome to Venus," she said in a happy-sounding voice. "You have just stepped into the future."

CHAPTER THREE

The future. Nick smiled to himself. One thing that made him happy was thinking up cool spaceships and imagining what it would be like to completely separate from Earth. Far away, where nobody knew him and the rules were entirely different.

He peered ahead through the thick foliage. In places the trees almost touched, creating a shady tunnel. A short distance ahead the path curved, and Nick couldn't see beyond that point. Birds of different voices whistled in the branches.

A young man and a woman came jogging along the path. They were dressed in a bluish material that covered them from neck to ankle. "Hi," the man said. He kept running but turned and waved. "Welcome aboard."

"Yeah, thanks," Mom answered. When they had passed, she raised an eyebrow.

Nick watched them until they veered off onto another path.

Up ahead, almost hidden behind more greenery, huddled a small rounded shed that looked like it was made out of white concrete.

Erika ran ahead. When she got there, a girl in a blue T-shirt and white shorts stepped out, brushing past a plant with three-foot-wide leaves.

"Hi there, I'll bet I know who you are. You're Erika Hammond."

Nick and his mother quickened their pace and caught up. The girl appeared a little older than Nick, and was beautiful in a strange sort of way. She had almost white hair, like corn silk, and pale blue, nearly blank eyes. In the slight breeze her hair seemed to float around her shoulders.

Nick's gaze traveled downward to the smoothest brown legs he had ever seen. Above her left knee was a yellow and purple tattoo of a bumblebee.

“Hello, Mrs. Hammond. Hi, Nicholas.” The girl smiled right at Nick. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Everyone calls me Nick.” Those eyes! Nick let his free hand fall to his side awkwardly and made himself smile back.

“Okay, Nick. I’m Alana and I’ll be your guide.”

“What is this place exactly?” Mom asked. “I feel like we’re in a jungle.”

“More like the Everglades,” Alana said. Her smile showed a row of perfectly white teeth.

Nick tried not to stare at her, but every time he looked away, he felt his eyes pulled right back. In a way that was good, but in another way that was very bad. She looked perfect, but more like a real live ghost. Light, airy, and... ‘lovely’ was the word he thought of. Nick’s hand went to his face, suddenly very aware of his freckles.

Obviously impressed, Erika looked up into Alana’s face. “Um... aren’t there alligators in the Everglades?”

“That’s right,” Alana answered. “You’re pretty smart.”

Erika grinned smugly.

Instinctively, Nick checked around him. No alligators. Things that slithered gave him the creeps. Paul Hornsby, the one Nick called Neanderthal, had once caught a snake and put it down Nick’s shirt; he’d had nightmares for weeks. To this day, reptiles of any kind freaked him out. Florida and alligators—he hadn’t made that connection until now.

“The Venus Project is a city,” Alana explained, sounding like she owned the place. “It’s sort of an experiment right now, but one of these days all cities will be similar to this one. It’s a city that thinks.” She turned her head, her silky hair swung.

“Oh, really?” Mom said. “A city that thinks. Why hasn’t this been in the news?”

“It has,” Alana told them, “but people don’t pay much attention to this kind of thing.” With a shrug she reached out for Nick’s hand and pressed it down on a glass plate, palm first. Her fingers felt cool in spite of the heat. “The sensors will register you, check your body chemistry,

that kind of thing. Let's see, you're thirteen?"

"Uh, I'll be *fifteen* next summer."

"Oh, wow, sorry." Alana touched his name on a blue screen that took up the whole curved wall of the shed. "Fourteen, then." After each of their names were rows of zeros.

Erika volunteered that she was eleven and put her hand on the plate. Mom did the same, though she didn't seem happy about it. As soon as she did, Alana touched a key and all the zeros on the screen scrambled, then settled into whole numbers.

As if she sensed their questions, Alana pointed and said, "That one's blood pressure. And this one tells you if there's heavy metal in your body." She glanced toward Nick. "Don't worry, you're okay."

Nick searched for his pocket with his left hand. Alana was not only older than him, she was also several inches taller. He wished she weren't so... unusual. Okay, unusual and beautiful.

"So," he said, struggling for something, anything, to say. "They let kids work here?"

"Oh, I just do this for fun," Alana answered, sounding proud of herself. She closed the shed and put something on her wrist that looked like a fat watch. Then she motioned for them to follow her.

Mom was already starting to sweat in the heat, but she re-arranged herself as if she were heading out on a safari. "Alana, we're supposed to meet my husband here. Do you know anything about that?"

She tapped the watch. "According to my Teleguide, he's outside Orlando, just turning onto the Interstate."

"Oh, you can track him?"

Alana nodded. "Of course."

"Two hours then." Mom sighed. "That's a long wait."

Nick stood by without saying anything. Busy, Dad was always busy. Amazing he could even fit them in. Then again, who cared? That gave them two hours to explore.

They continued along the path, except now there were masses of green plants with red blossoms at the base of the trees. Overhead some

kind of knobby fruit hung under wide green leaves. The leaves were perfect with no dead parts or notches eaten out by bugs.

“Oh.” Alana turned back to Mom. “I’m supposed to ask you if you’d like to do a painting for us; something we can display in the Central Dome.

Mom’s mouth opened. “How did you know I paint?”

“It came up this morning in the database.”

“Well,” Mom answered, “I don’t know that we’ll be here long enough for that, but I’m very flattered.”

“I paint, too,” Erika told her. “I did a painting of a butterfly that’s on the wall at my school. I could probably get it for you if you want it.”

“Erika...” *Shut up*, Nick wanted to say. Alana flashed him another smile. Then finally, Nick got it. Dad must be investing in this place and they were doing a sales job, trying to get Mom to buy in too. Smiles probably didn’t mean a thing.

It made sense, given than Dad had come to Florida on business. This was just more of the same. Nick sagged with disappointment, though he wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t as if he and Dad were great buddies any more, or that he really thought an older girl would care about a fourteen-year-old with freckles.

The path took another turn then and came out into a clearing with the look of a sci-fi movie set—tall, white buildings with swoops, curves and banks of glass reflecting other buildings. On second thought, this could be okay, Nick thought. He brightened. Dad could sell sod, and Nick would get some time in SpaceCity.

In the distance he spotted a monster machine with a big moving arm. Overhead, a fat silver disc with a blur of helicopter rotors hovered almost soundlessly. But it didn’t look like a normal helicopter; this one had engines at the rotor tips. Nick stopped walking to watch, realizing that his mouth had opened.

“This way.” Alana led them to the right where an escalator descended underground.

Nick hurried to keep up while trying to notice every detail. He started to text Hank, but gave it up when they all rode downward into coolness and a well-lit tunnel that seemed to be made entirely of chrome and glass. No seams, no signs on the curved walls, and a cool breeze from some unknown source. Nick noticed the air smelled fresh, not what you'd expect underground.

When they got to the bottom, a silver snake of a train raced away just as another arrived. The trains never stopped moving. About thirty people were waiting to get on. Alana led the Hammonds across the marble floor where they stepped onto a platform that paced the train. It was totally weird—once on it, there was no sensation of moving at all!

Alana called over her shoulder, “This is the Number Four Radial. We’ll be at the Central Dome in about seven minutes.”

Just ahead of them on the same platform was a familiar figure. Nick peered around the other people to get a better look—it had to be the kid he’d seen at the entrance. With the group was an older boy in a baseball cap, their guide probably.

The kid was gesturing wildly and arguing with his family, still carrying the metal box by its handle. It didn’t look like your average suitcase, and Nick wondered what could be in it.

Suddenly the boy leaned past his family, making eye-contact with Nick. “What’re you lookin’ at?” he demanded.

Nothing, Nick was about to say, but he didn’t want to sound like a wimp in front of Alana. He stepped back so the kid couldn’t see him.

A moment later, a commotion came from the same direction, and Nick watched in disbelief as the kid jumped off the platform and ran. Arms, legs, and the metal box all jutting out in different directions.

“Hey!” the guide called. People all around them turned to look, and the Radial went on by without anyone at all getting on.

Then the kid darted around a chrome pillar. A loud *whack* reverberated through the tunnel, and in the next instant he was sliding on his side, holding the box protectively to his chest like a football in the end zone.

CHAPTER FOUR

The boy in the baseball cap rushed to help him up, and the argument continued. Finally, the kid shook himself off, rubbed his knee and got back onto the ramp, still cradling his box.

“Geez,” Mom said.

“I’ve never seen anything like *that* before,” Alana said, her pale eyes looking serious. “Not everyone takes to Venus, but...”

But what? Nick wondered. That something about Venus was so awful that a kid would try to escape? Maybe someone had threatened to take his box away from him. Now he really wondered what was in it. Some sort of food stash? His puppy? Money?

Then all was forgotten when the next Radial whizzed into view. The trains seemed to run almost constantly.

The white smile returned to Alana’s face. “Come on, watch this.”

Nick forced himself to pay attention. He watched the people ahead of them walk along a few paces, then step sideways into one of the cars. The kid and his group disappeared into one of the attached cars. One man, who was still looking at the kid with his box, did not even watch his step as he got on.

“Just merge,” Alana told them, and moved into a car marked ‘C.’ “Follow me.”

Mom took Erika’s hand and they stepped onto a rubbery surface. Behind them, a man in a tall wheelchair, tall enough to make him the same height as everyone else, rolled in without the slightest bump. It seemed impossible at the speed the trains were going, but it all happened smoothly.

“There’s no noise,” Nick commented.

“I know. The Radial doesn’t actually touch the tracks.”

“So it rides on air or something?”

“Right. Magnetic levitation.”

“Nice,” Nick said. “I’ve never been on one before.”

The four of them found seats facing each other, with Erika sitting

happily next to Alana. Nick couldn't stop fidgeting. He wondered if Alana had noticed his freckles, especially now that he was sitting so close to her. Of course, she noticed, but she was too polite to stare at him. Until she got with her friends later, and they could all double over laughing.

"You can't tell from here," Alana told them, "but some cars are lifted out and sent on different routes." She shot a look at Mom whose forehead was wrinkled into another scowl. "Don't worry, it took me a long time to get used to things in Venus."

"So you live here or something?" Nick managed.

"We were one of the first families in Venus." She crossed her legs, stretching the bee until it looked like a dragonfly. "I couldn't live anywhere else."

"That's a cool tattoo," Erika said. "Does it wash off?"

Alana rubbed her knee. "Nope." Then she bounced her leg up and down for Erika's benefit. "I'll have it forever, even when I'm ninety."

"No one has tattoos when they're ninety."

"When I get there they will," Alana told her.

Nick's mother gave him a sideways smile. She seemed to say Alana was okay, and Nick had to agree.

His attention was pulled away then by a display screen above Alana's head. It showed the layout of a city—a great, green wheel of concentric circles.

The camera was just sweeping across the outer ring showing an area that looked like a golf course, except with thousands of trees and crisscrossing pathways. It zoomed in on a man walking and a couple of women riding bikes. Otherwise, the paths seemed deserted.

Alana tipped her head back to where she could see what he was looking at. "That's what you'd see if this train were above ground." Her pale hair swished.

"Yeah, I figured that out," Nick said, although he hadn't really.

“This place is *big*.”

All the way to the Central Dome he happily watched the screen, wondering how a city so strange could be hidden right in the middle of Florida.



They passed beneath ponds and streams with footbridges, a wide blue waterway with elliptical boats in slips, rows of crops in glass domes, tall buildings surrounded by machines with arms and enormous treads, and more green grass.

Nick nudged his mother. There were millions of square feet of sod over these trains, a fact Dad had probably not missed. Mom’s eyebrow arched.

“We should be passing under the domiciles right about now,” Alana pointed out. “They’re shaped like domes, so that’s what we call them. I live on Epsilon Ring, Quadrant Eight, right out there—they’re named for the Greek alphabet. You know, alpha, beta, gamma... like that. Your dome is just up the path from ours.”

Mom squinted and leaned closer to the screen.

“After you get settled, you can submit a home design of your own.”

Alana obviously thought they’d be here for quite a while, long enough for Mom to do a painting and for them to build a new house.

Yeah, if only, Nick thought, but the longest anyone had ever been allowed out of school, other than summer, was two weeks. Nick would never catch up if he missed any more than that—not that he cared, really.

“We’re coming up on Beta Ring,” Alana was saying. “I personally think Jack Frasier lives here.”

Nick waited. “Okay... who’s Jack Frasier?”

“Just our founder,” Alana said proudly. “No one knows for sure where he lives.”

“Oh,” was all Nick could think to say. The guy who founded Skagit was no big deal, but the town had a parade every year. He peered at the screen, hoping to catch a glimpse of a mansion, Venus style, where a founder might live, but all he saw were more domes in strange configurations.

A few minutes later the screen showed what looked like apartment complexes—the buildings he’d seen from the road—tall white cones pointing skyward on the landscape. Some looked more like towers with pods attached.

Alana uncrossed her legs and the bee bobbed. Nick tried not to look, but there it was not two feet from him. He reached for his cell phone to text Hank, but changed his mind.

“Look, the Central Ring is coming up. It’s really Alpha Ring, but no one calls it that.” Alana twisted around in her seat and pointed at the screen. “Everything is there; orientation, shopping...”

“Actually, we’re starving,” Mom interrupted. “Aren’t we?”

“Yesss,” Erika agreed. “Do you have a pizza place here?”

“Not exactly,” Alana told her. “We have nutrition centers, a million of them.”

Nick realized that he was hungry too, but not necessarily for anything healthy. A Coke and French fries sounded good. On the screen,

he could see that the Central Dome was a white starfish of a building with a massive glass entryway under each arm. Somewhere under there was probably a restaurant.

The foursome stood up on Alana's cue and this time merged off of the Radial and onto a moving sidewalk. The train kept going as if it had never noticed that anyone had been aboard. Nick did a quick scan, but did not see the kid and his group.

They ended up in a sort of courtyard with masses of trees, flowers, and angular silver sculptures that were also fountains. The sound of rushing water came at them from all sides. Erika pulled off her shoes and socks, and jumped up on the rim of one of the fountains. Mom gasped, about to tell her to get down, but Alana took Erika's hand and walked along with her.

Across the expanse of the courtyard only half a dozen people, mostly dressed in summer clothes, were laughing and talking. A few wore body suits like the joggers earlier. Erika jumped off the end of the fountain.

Alana had called this a city, but it didn't look like any city Nick had ever seen. Where were the people with laptop bags? The billboards? The cars and buses?

Then Nick noticed just beyond the courtyard a small red bubble-shaped car hardly any bigger than the boy driving it. While Nick watched, two more cars appeared from different directions, one silver and one turquoise. When the silver one came to the intersection, it lifted up and floated over the top of the turquoise car.

"Hey, did you see that?" Nick turned to Alana. "What are those cars?"

"You mean the PMs? You want to drive one?"

Nick laughed. He watched both cars pull in next to a row of similar vehicles.

"PM—Proximity Mechanized," Alana explained. "You can check one out as soon as you go through orientation."

"Really? That's it?"

"I don't think so," Mom protested. "He's only fourteen."

“No, seriously,” Alana said, looking from Mom to Nick and back again. “Jack Frasier designed them himself. They’re completely safe.”

“We’ll see.” Mom didn’t seem convinced; he’d have to ask his father.

“They’re too fast for me,” Alana added. “Of course, the PMs travel above ground, if that makes any difference.”

It did. “Fantastic,” Nick said, a smile pulling at this face. “I can’t wait to see this place close up.”

“If you hurry, you might be able to catch an orientation tonight,” Alana added. “They run every two hours, even if there’s only one person.”

While Nick’s pulse quickened at the thought, Mom stopped walking and brought her hand to her hip. “Alana, is there anything you’re not telling us? Is Venus a Time Share? Is that it?”

“What do you mean?” A cloudy look passed over Alana’s face as if Mom had hurt her feelings.

“You know, a business where you go to an orientation and they try to get you to buy two weeks of vacation time in their resort?”

“Mo-om!” Nick cringed.

“Oh, no,” Alana said, “Like I said, Venus is a city, a real city. People live here. Hey, didn’t your husband tell you anything about this at all?”

“Well...” Mom stammered.

Oh-oh!

“Oh, brother,” Alana rubbed her neck. “Look, Venus is just so hard to explain. We have orientation, but no one comes here without knowing what they’re getting into.”

What was going on? Nick searched his brain for an answer—a university, a CIA installation, an alien outpost—nothing quite fit. You could never tell with Dad, and he’d been acting weird all week.

Mom let out one of her worried sighs. “None of this makes any sense. My husband sometimes... well, what I mean is, I’m sure this has something to do with a business we own.”

“Oh,” Alana said. “I see.”

There it was again—business. Boring. That’s how Nick saw it. His father had even warned Nick that if he didn’t get better grades, he’d never be able to make it in The Business. Well, maybe that was why Nick always got lousy grades, so he wouldn’t have to devote his life to fertilizer.

“Look!” Erika was saying, “it’s *huge*.”

Nick looked up at the top of the Central Dome. She was right. This was much, much larger than he had first thought, with entrances that rose several stories. Windows reflected back at them like enormous tinted mirrors they couldn’t see through.

Mom was already shading her eyes and looking upward too. “How many of you live in Venus?” she asked, sighing as if she were resigned to whatever Gil Hammond had cooked up. “Where are all the people? I mean... it must take thousands of you to run a place like this.”

“Well, that’s another thing,” Alana said. “We don’t have employees. At least not like you think of them.”

Nick expected her to say something wholesome like, *The workers here consider themselves volunteers*. She had already said she worked as a guide for the fun of it. But instead, she said, “No one works here. Haven’t you noticed? Venus is almost completely automated.”

CHAPTER FIVE

How could a city be automated? Nick pictured a city of vending machines—fine, except when they got jammed or ran out of candy bars. Wouldn’t someone have to refill the vending machines?

“You can eat dinner early and check in later if you want to,” Alana said, as if she hadn’t picked up on their confusion. “I can meet you back here whenever.” She waved to two girls, one of them wearing a shiny, tight suit.

“Okay,” Mom said. She shook her head as if to free her thoughts. “I’m starting to feel dizzy.”

“Well, this is our version of fast food.” Alana pointed out a white dome just beyond the courtyard. Lemon trees in huge pots created a wall between a grassy area and a row of small tables.

Again, Nick would have expected a sign of some kind, like *Lemon Tree Restaurant*. With no signs anywhere it was going to be tough to find their way around, especially since the whole city seemed to be one big wheel divided into look-alike sections.

Nick’s mother switched her bag to her other arm.

“I can take those for you and meet you all back here at 6:30.” Alana said, and collected everyone’s belongings. “We can all check out your domicile together, if that’s okay with you.”

“Sure,” Mom said.

It would be dark by then, they would definitely need a guide, and Nick would get to see Alana again, maybe see where she lived. He felt his face flush and he squirmed. *Who cares?* he said to himself, though he knew he didn’t really mean it.

“Oh,” Alana added, “if you get lost, just ask an Orcon.” She nodded toward a post at the intersection of two paths near them, locked eyes with Nick for just a second, then headed back toward the radial. Obviously—fortunately—she hadn’t read his mind.

When she was out of sight, Mrs. Hammond said, “An automated city? This is a *long way* from home, Nick.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“It’s three thousand forty miles,” Erika informed them.

Nick rolled his eyes. “You checked the Frequent Flyer miles, right?”

Erika chortled smugly. Nick knew miles were not what Mom was talking about. Venus was a long way from the ordinary life they lived on Pinewood Drive and Pacific Redi-Lawn, not the kind of place Nick would expect his father to care about.

Passing the outdoor tables, they entered through a curled opening in the front of the dome, like going into a seashell. Inside, small round tables were partially encircled by high, brightly-colored cushions and seatbacks. The bases themselves seemed to grow right out of the floor. Four people sat at the only occupied booth, all eating their meals off of cardboard dishes of every shape and size.

“Please place your hand on the scanner and have a seat,” a male voice said. “Your meal will be served shortly.”

Mom waved toward the ceiling. “Hello, all I want is a hamburger, double pickles.” She didn’t laugh. “*Where* is your father?”

The amazing Gil Hammond, Nick thought. “I can’t figure out why he didn’t tell us about this place.”

“I can answer that one,” Mom said. “Your father was afraid if he told us, we wouldn’t come.”

“You think so?”

“This is not exactly a vacation place, Nick. People don’t *live* at resorts.” With a resigned sigh she put her hand on the scanner. “We’re being scanned every time we turn around. Isn’t this an invasion of privacy?”

Erika stepped up and squished her face onto the glass plate. “I wonder what’s under there.”

“Erika, stop it,” Mom said, and yanked her back. “It could be an x-ray or something for all we know.”

Nick didn’t think it was an X-ray; the restaurant could be sued. He touched his palm to the glass, then they all headed for an apple-green booth and slid in. A menu was printed on top of the table, repeated

several times around the circle.

Erika plopped her elbows on the table. “I’m starving,” she announced. *Whoosh*. The center of their table dropped out of view.

Mom jumped. “Erika, what did you do?”

“*Nothing!*”

Nick leaned forward to look into the hole, but the table top was already on its way back up, loaded now with dishes of food. Steam and a wonderful tomato smell came from a plate of lasagna.

“We haven’t even ordered!” Mom looked like she was either amused or furious, but she hadn’t decided which.

“Maybe it read our minds,” Erika suggested, looking over the plates.

“I don’t think so,” Mom said. “My mind was seeing French fries.”

The other group of people smiled in their direction. They all wore regular clothes. A woman leaned forward. “Is this your first time in a NutritionCenter?”

Mom dropped her hand in her lap. “I guess it’s pretty obvious.”

A big man at the table explained, “That scanner over there reads your medical condition and your nutritional needs. Those meals there are what *the machine* thinks you ought to be eating today.”

“You’re kidding?” Mom said to the man.

Nick sniffed the plates. “Mmm.”

“I always hit ‘Choice,’” the man told them. “That way, I can order what I want.” He had a round belly and a big neck.

The woman gave him a sideways look. “That machine is trying to help you, Jerry. It’s a good way to stay healthy, if you ask me.”

He leaned toward the Hammonds as if he were about to tell them a secret. “The man who founded this place just announced he’s perfected foods that taste like anything you want. You know, Italian, Chinese, whatever. Fake, in other words.”

“Oh, quit it,” the woman said with a friendly slap to his arm.

“Thanks for telling us.” Mom reached for one of the cardboard plates of food. A corner chipped off. “Oh—”

Jerry laughed, then he did the weirdest thing; he picked up one of

his dishes and took a bite out of it. “They’re edible,” he explained with his mouth full. “Frankly, they’re not bad.”

Nick shut his mouth, realizing it had dropped open. So the dishes couldn’t be cardboard. He broke off a small piece of a bowl and nibbled at it. It was flaky and tasted a little salty, like a thick tostada shell.

Erika broke pieces off one of the plates, paying no attention to the salad that was on it.

“Erika, someone might want to eat the food, you know.” Mom picked up a normal-looking fork. “So, what does the machine think I need? Low calorie, probably. This all looks pretty good, actually.”

Some unseen intelligence had sent them salad with shrimp, the lasagna, something that looked like fried chicken, fruit, rice, bread and pie.

Jerry lifted his wrist and talked into his Teleguide, which must have been the Venus version of the cell phone. Then the people finished eating—including their plates—said goodbye, and left.

Nick stopped chewing as he looked around the dome. They were the only customers now. Where was everyone? They were still alone when they finished their meals. They did not eat the dishes.

Mom looked around the nutrition center. “I wonder how we pay.” “Maybe it’s free,” Nick said.

“Trust me, Nick. Nothing’s free. Maybe it goes on our bill somehow.”

“That scanner probably knows our *domicile* number,” Erika put in.

“Yes, I’m sure we’ll get a bill,” Mom said, and stood up. “Come on.”

The moment they stepped away, the tabletop dropped down, taking the dishes and leftovers. Who could tell where the food went?

Without leaving a tip for the invisible waitress, the three of them walked purposefully toward the seashell doorway. This was surreal. Lights, more like tiny LED points, had come on around the courtyard. Saucer-like craft, glowing a pale green, slid along overhead.

Only a few people milled around, some of them carrying packages out of the big dome. Nick stopped to watch a man and a boy of about ten

or eleven pushing a shiny, white boat out on a trailer.

Mom checked her watch. “We have a little time; let’s go shopping. There’s hardly anyone around—off season maybe.”

Erika patted her pocket where she had stashed some of her quarters.

Several small kiosks sat in the middle of the courtyard. They, too, were dome shaped, as if they represented some sort of theme here. One side of the dome closest to them was open, exposing shelves of ordinary things—sunglasses, bottled water, bags of sunflower seeds, pens, and pencils.

Mom picked up a pad of unlined paper. “I should have brought a sketch pad.” She turned it over, looking for the price, then picked up another and turned it over too.

An older woman in a long skirt reached in front of Nick to get a package of pretzels. She didn’t look for a price; she just turned and walked off with it. The Hammonds watched her pull open the bag and take out a pretzel.

“Shoplifters!” Mom muttered. “I guess this city isn’t all that unusual, after all.” She nudged them toward the Central Dome.

As they approached, Nick noticed that the curvature of the glass gradually revealed what was inside. A three-story globe dominated the entire center. He went through first and stood gaping up at it—the surface moved as if it were alive. The ball glowed softly in beautiful shades of blue, green, and white.



Lights blinked at different locations as if calling attention to themselves.

Nick's head tipped back so far that he could hardly swallow. "Oh, wow!"

"What is it?" Mom asked.

"It's Earth," Erika answered, as if that weren't obvious.

But Nick knew she was right: this wasn't a globe of the earth, but more like *the earth itself*. Masses of cloud formations turned in swirling patterns. The seas glistened. Pale lights crowded around the edges of the continents. The orb was moving, too, very slowly. At the base, several people with shopping bags or little kids beside them stood at computer terminals.

"Amazing," Mom went on. "What's it *for*?"

Then a man from behind them said, "Isn't it wonderful? It's a hologram."

Nick, Erika and Mom all turned toward the voice.

"I made pretty good time," Gil Hammond said. He was smiling one of the biggest smiles Nick had ever seen, and it seemed to be directed

straight at him.

CHAPTER SIX

“Dad!” Erika danced all around him, her quarters rattling in her pockets.

He opened his arms and gathered them all in, pressing Nick’s cheek against his red tie. Nick pulled back and forced a smile.

Mr. Hammond was a bulky man with a square jaw and thick eyebrows, someone who was always very sure he was right.

“Isn’t this something?” his father said, turning back toward the huge ball. “That globe is a holographic image of the earth. Thousands of pictures are sent down from satellites. It can track storms and even shipments...”

Obviously, he knew all about it.

Mom pushed her hair back and folded her arms.

“Hi, Ann,” he said. “I know I’ve got some explaining to do.” He gave her a little kiss on the cheek, like he always did.

“Like what’s really going on,” Mom answered. Her mouth was set tight. “We’d better talk.”

“Yeah, well, maybe we could get a cup of coffee or something.” Dad swung around as if looking for a Starbuck’s sign.

Nick felt his breath suck in.

“We were in a restaurant where people ate the plates,” Erika told him.

“That right?”

“Where are we really, Gil? What’s this all about?”

They walked together outside and Nick looked around for one of the Orcons Alana had pointed out. He felt nervous now. Was this really a simple vacation, or was Dad up to something like he’d suspected? Last time it was sod; what was it this time?

Luckily, even though it was dark, the Orcons weren’t hard to spot; the pedestals where they were mounted glowed a soft green wherever a path intersected with the courtyard. Nick stepped up to the nearest one and leaned close to it. “Where can we get refreshments?”

A woman's voice answered, "Refreshment centers are located at all blue locations. Proceed along any path."

"Thanks," Nick said to the machine.

"You're welcome," it answered.

Nick smiled. "This way," he hollered to the others. He led them on a path that snaked through more trees and flowers to a waterfall, where stubby solar lights with flat cells on top outlined an outdoor café. A blue banner flew from one of the poles.

Nick stopped to watch the waterfall cascade into a pool at the bottom, then flow underneath the café and into a rocky stream. Plants grew everywhere, over the edges and out of every crack in the rocks.

Erika joined him, leaning far over the railing. "Dad's in trouble."

"No kidding." Nick held onto Erika's shirt so she wouldn't fall, though it wouldn't hurt her any if she got a dunking. Back home coats would soon be zipped to the neck. Nick would have to give Hank a hard time about this, maybe take him some corny gift like a bottle of suntan lotion.

A man in jeans and sandals sat reading a book at one of the tables. Two other people sat near enough to the waterfall to be getting damp from the spray. They were both dressed in body suits, but the fabric looked more pink now.

No one else was around. Nick claimed one of the four remaining tables and Erika sat down across from him. A moment later, their parents came along the path.

When they were all seated, Dad said, "You'll love this." He ran his hand over the tabletop. "The menus are projected under the glass."

"We know," Mom said, sounding impatient.

He tapped his finger on 'Iced Tea.' "What'll you have Erika? Nick-boy?"

Nick-boy? He sure was in a good mood. Usually his father displayed no mood at all, so it was impossible to tell if he even had them. They didn't have Coke, so Nick touched 'Lemonade.' Mom picked something called 'Serene.'

With a swish the tabletop retreated and returned with their drinks.

“So, you’ve been here before,” Mom started.

“Yes, yes I have. I need to tell you about that.” Dad put his jacket over the back of his chair and rolled up his shirtsleeves, taking a long time with the cuffs. “I don’t know quite how to begin,” he said.

Nick felt himself lean forward.

“Gil, just spit it out,” Mom pushed. “What’s going on?”

“Well, for starters, the merger didn’t go through.”

Nick could tell by the look on his parents’ faces that a bombshell had just dropped. Dad’s big dream. Erika sat with her feet scraping back and forth. For once, she didn’t say anything.

“Okay...” Mom said. “So we look for another opportunity.”

“No,” Dad said, “Pacific Redi-Lawn can’t make it without the merger. We’re going broke, Ann, to put it bluntly. East Coast Sod will put us out of business in six months. They’re expanding all over the country... without us.”

There it was. Nick felt his heart quicken with dread. So why was his father in such a good mood? He knew what it meant to be broke. Broke people didn’t live on Pinewood Drive, that was for sure.

Mom sat silently for several long seconds while Dad just stared at her. Finally she erupted. “Then why in the world are we out here on an expensive vacation, Gil? They think we’re going to be here for a long time. They even invited me to do a painting for them, and to design our own *domicile*.”

Mom made a good point. Why would they? Unless they didn’t know.

“Because it’s all true,” Dad said. “Look, I didn’t realize until I got to the entrance that you hadn’t been through Orientation. I tried to give you enough time...”

“So you were late on purpose?”

“Well, sort of.”

Oh-oh. This was really bad. There was going to be an explosion.

“Gil! After we hadn’t really talked all week!”

“A few days,” Dad countered. “It wasn’t a week.”

Almost six days, Nick calculated. He took a slurp of lemonade—at

least it tasted like lemonade—and stared down at the yellow pulp floating on top.

“How could you?”

“What you would have found out,” Dad pushed on, “is that The Venus Project is a most unusual place. It’s a new way to live... without any money.”

Nick felt his eyes open wider.

Mom leaned back and crossed her arms. “Gil, come on. Everything costs money. What do you mean, there’s no money?”

“Try to be open-minded...” There was that phrase again.

Mom’s arm came down and knocked over her glass. Nick jumped back as liquid Serenity spread across the table. Instantly the tabletop retreated, taking with it all their drinks. His mother gasped. Somewhere down below water swirled and a motor churned, then the table reappeared as if nothing had happened. Four brand new drinks sat in the correct places.

“What are we doing here?” Mom demanded, “last time you were in this mood you opened a new business. You said the sod business was your true calling.”

The man reading the book looked up, turned a page, and went back to reading.

Nick sat quietly, moving only his eyes, to exchange a look with Erika. His heart pounded in rhythm with Dad’s words, growing faster and faster. Oh, man, his father had never gone this far before.

“Just listen to me... please... just listen. Okay? Calling’s can change.” Dad took a breath and leaned in closer.

“Think about it, Ann... kids... a high-tech, automated place where you don’t need money. Imagine being able to do whatever you want, without having to worry about things like mergers.

“There’d be no thieves because anything you needed would be yours for the taking. No crime, no police. Big projects could be done without having to find the funding—dams, bridges, cities even. There wouldn’t even be wars.”

“I’m sure there’d still be wars.” Mom rolled her eyes.

“No, I don’t think so,” Dad argued. “Most wars are over money, when you get down to it.”

“Gil, we’ve been through this before. We’ve barely gotten settled in Skagit. Well, three years, but...”

This was not what Nick had expected, not that he had *expected* anything really. It was just that when Dad left the university, he claimed sod was The Thing. Americans would pay for anything they didn’t have to wait for, he said.

Then life had been on Pinewood Drive, with Dad gazing out over his beautiful green fields of instant lawn. Nick had made a new friend—sort of—Hank was everyone’s friend, and Nick was one of them. What was his father saying, really?

“Dad, if there’s no money, how do you get things?” Nick asked. “Who would give them to you for free?”

His father sighed. “Look,” he said. “They give it to you because they don’t need money either. When they go to the shopping plaza, they just stock up on whatever they need, the same way you do.”

Nick flashed on the woman who had taken the pretzels without paying for them. “How would you get rich, then?” he asked, knowing how ridiculous it sounded.

Mom started to laugh—that’s what she always did when her worrying went over the top—though Dad didn’t seem to think anything was funny. He just sat there drumming his fingers on the tabletop without answering the question.

After a full minute of this, Mom straightened. “Gil, if people could just take whatever they wanted, what’s to stop someone from taking... I don’t know... six TVs or a hundred pairs of shoes?”

“Why?” Dad said. “Why would they want to do that?”

Yes, why would they? Amazing. For once, Nick could actually see what his father was getting at. “They wouldn’t,” he explained, “because if you could have anything you wanted, anytime you wanted it, you wouldn’t want that much.”

“That’s right,” Dad said. “Good, Nick.”

Nick felt his mouth pull into a smile.

“When there’s plenty of everything people need,” his father went on, “there’s no reason to want more. And, almost everything here is automated. No one has to do boring, mundane jobs. Even the machines are built in turn by other machines. Tomorrow we’ll take a look. What do you say?” He leaned closer. “I’m just asking you to be open-minded.”

“Gil, if you use that phrase one more time, I’m going to... I don’t know.”

Erika just sat there, looking from one face to the other.

Nick felt something warm starting inside of him. This could be okay, more than okay. Maybe for once his father’s crazy ideas were going to be a good thing for Nick. He had to be careful, though, not let himself get too happy. More often than not, things didn’t work out the way you’d think, especially when you were still in the child category.

“Okay,” Dad was saying. “Tomorrow we can all go to Orientation together.”

Orientation. “Alana!” Nick snapped to attention. “Oh, no!”

Mom looked at her watch. “It’s almost 6:40. Nick, run tell Alana we’ll be right there.” She explained to Dad, “She’ll be showing us to this dome place where we’re supposed to be staying.”

Nick jogged back the way they had come. When he got to the Central Dome courtyard, there was Alana talking to a group of kids all dressed in regular clothes. She was wearing jeans and a white shirt now. At her feet were the Hammond’s bags.

“Hey, Alana,” Nick called. “Sorry, I’m late. Mom and Dad are on their way.”

Alana smiled her white smile. “Come here,” she beckoned. “I want you to meet my friends. They’ll be your friends, too. There aren’t many kids here so far.”

Nick approached. Meeting new kids was not his favorite thing. “Hi.”

“That’s Jamal in the big T-shirt there, and Curtis, Michiyo, Len and Romi.”

Michiyo smiled. “Which dome are you in?” Her hair hung straight

and black around a friendly face.

“I’m taking them over in a minute,” Alana said. “They’re going to be down the path from me—in 84.”

Curtis said, “Hey, cool. I’m in 81. You’ll like it out there.”

Nick eyed Curtis in his baseball cap. He’d been the guide with the kid on the Radial platform. “So,” Nick said, forcing himself to stay cool. “Where do you guys go to school?” He assumed they lived in Venus like Alana did.

The kids all looked at each other, then Curtis laughed. “Actually, we don’t have schools here.”

Nick stared at them, waiting for the joke. “No, really, what about school?”

Mom, Dad and Erika caught up with him then, and Alana went through introductions again.

After a few minutes of chatting about nothing in particular, everyone left, except Curtis, Alana and the Hammonds.

Curtis flipped a cap onto his head. “I may as well tag along. We’re going the same way.”

Nick wanted to ask him about the kid with the box, but there didn’t seem to be an opening now. He managed a smile and picked up his bag. The six of them headed back to the Radial platform and merged aboard.

There were only two or three other people in the whole car. Crossing beneath the rings of Venus, Nick noticed on the overhead display that the huge machines were still busy, building whatever they were building. Lights had come on in columns of what looked like apartment buildings. A lone bicycle moved along a path.

Finally, they came to Epsilon Ring and got off. From the Radial they proceeded to a moving sidewalk and then to footpaths. Black outlines of trees and other plants lined the walkways, small solar lights showing the way.

Straight up through the trees, Nick could see millions of stars, like little pinpricks in black velvet. A great wave of contentment washed through him, and he heard himself exhale. The only other sounds were their own footsteps on mulch and a slight breeze moving the trees. A

cricket abruptly stopped its chirping when they walked past.

Dad just walked along without saying anything. Nick eyed him all the way, wondering what had gotten into him. Venus man. Was it possible that something amazing really had changed his father? What he really hoped, though, was that something here would change *him*. Into what, he wasn't sure.

Finally, they stopped. "This is it," Alana announced with a happy-sounding sigh. "You're home."

Near the path in front of them, squatting in the shadows, was a domed house with round windows, looking like giant eyeballs bulging out on the side.



A small bonnet of a roof curved out over a porch where several lawn chairs and a table waited.

"I hope this one's okay," Dad said, sounding especially nice. "The guest domes are all different, but I thought this one would suit us."

Alana approached the wide glass door, which seemed to trigger the lights. Everything lit up at once—the yard, the porch, and the interior of the dome.

At precisely the same time, something whipped past Nick's leg. He looked down in time to see a great scaly tail slither into the bushes, followed by a splash into nearby water.

Nick jumped straight up, letting out a screech.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mom backed up against the dome, pulling Erika with her.

“Oh-oh,” Alana said. “Sorry. This domicile hasn’t been used in a while and they like to lie around on the white concrete.”

Nick’s heart thumped. It was obvious that *they* were alligators.

“You okay, Nick?” Dad asked. “How many gators are around here?”

“They won’t hurt you,” Curtis said. “They’ve been taught not to bite humans.”

“Gil...”

“What do you mean, taught?” Dad asked.

Alana went on into the dome. “When they’re first spotted on the property, they’re put in a pond where they get zapped for latching onto this mannequin leg we have rigged up there.”

“Well, I certainly hope they’re good students,” Mom said. She released Erika, who tiptoed behind Alana into the dome.

“They’re not that much of a problem,” Curtis insisted. “Just don’t go out in the dark without a Teleguide.” He laughed.

“Don’t worry,” Mom said. “I won’t be going anywhere in the dark at all. I hope this dome has an indoor bathroom.”

“Of course,” Alana said, “and a nice one too. I really am sorry.”

Nick’s heart had slowed to normal and he stepped into the dome. He was the last one inside, the door slid closed as if it knew. Standing on a shiny, pebbled floor, he looked over the place where they would be living for the time being. It didn’t look anything like a hotel room.

The inside was as much a sphere as the outside with round walls, domed ceiling, and a curve of kitchen counter, even a rounded refrigerator with a keypad on the door. Nothing was made of wood. *I love it*, Nick thought.

“The domiciles are pressurized,” Alana told them. “Dust and contaminants can’t get in.”

“Really,” Mom said. “That could be good.”

Erika stood in the middle, tracing the dome’s shape with her eyes.

“This is just like being inside a beach ball.”

“See, Ann, it’s all made of cement over a metal frame—
inexpensive and efficient.”

Mom moved warily, poking her head out ahead of her as if she expected a second alligator to have gotten in.

“Nothing is wasted. Look at this.” Dad opened a set of doors, one of the few structures in the dome that was not curved, and a bed floated down to settle on the floor.

“A Murphy bed. My parents had one of those,” Mom said.

“Not like this,” Dad countered. “You can pick this one up with one finger.” He demonstrated by lifting the bed up chest high and letting it back down. “And the sheets change themselves every morning. Not only that, they monitor how much sleep you’re getting.”

“Hm, useful,” Mom conceded. “The doors lock, don’t they?” She was probably wondering if she could even sleep in a dome with alligators outside.

Alana looked surprised. “Of course, but you won’t need locks.”

“Sensors record everything,” Curtis told her. It was as if everyone was trying to sell Mom a condo.

“Well, I like it,” Nick announced. That was the way he was beginning to feel. He remembered going to a home show years ago, pushing Erika’s stroller up a ramp into a futuristic house. Everything had been super modern and organized like the inside of a space station. He remembered standing there for a long time pretending he was on Mars.

If he let his imagination float freely, he could do the same thing now. He looked upward where a circular skylight about five feet in diameter took up the entire top of the dome. A palm frond brushed against the glass making a scratching sound.

Lights turned on automatically as anyone approached them. One was inside a globe of the earth affixed to a drafting table, next to a wall of bookcases.

To the right of the bookcases a doorway led into a second, smaller dome. Nick poked his head in—the rounded room was divided by an ‘S’-

shaped low wall.

Alana leaned past him and pointed. “Your beds are behind those panels.”

“Weird bathroom,” Erika commented. She had moved on to a tiny closet of a room between the second dome and the kitchen. The whole group moved in unison and stood outside peering in.

The bathroom was mostly a shower cylinder from floor to domed roof. Out of the cylinder on one side extended a sink with a hose-like faucet. A toilet grew out of the opposite side.

“It’s all one water system,” Curtis explained. “Efficient. Wastes get recycled immediately.”

Nick noticed a small computer screen mounted on the back of the toilet and another on the side of the shower. He didn’t want to think what those might be for.

The Hammonds stood quietly, taking it all in. This was like a home, but with the look of a science lab.

“Well, I guess we’d better get going,” Alana said when they’d seen everything—it hadn’t taken long in such a small space. “I’ll come by at nine to get you for orientation.”

“Thanks,” Dad said, “We’ll be ready. Breakfast at the table, right?” He pointed to a round table only a few feet from the end of the bed.

“Exactly,” Alana answered. She and Curtis left together, and the door slid shut. Nick watched them disappear into the night alone—weren’t they worried about alligators?

Now what? So far he couldn’t tell how things were going. Mom hadn’t liked it when Dad left the university, though she’d gotten on board with the sod business, doing paintings for Pacific Redi-Lawn advertising. She’d even won an award. But sleeping in a dome? That was something different. Still... this time Nick found himself on his father’s side.

Dad stood in the middle of the round room with a disappointed expression on his face. Nick wanted to be excited, but history told him he’d better not go there just yet.

Along fifteen feet or so of the curved wall was a couch formed out of concrete, part of the dome itself. On top and along the back were fat

cushions of pale green fabric. The round table with the usual sectioned glass top and menus was positioned in front.

Erika plopped down and leaned back against the cushion, her legs sprawled in front of her. “This is pretty cool,” she said, and got right to the point. “How long can we stay?”

“Well...” Dad sounded relieved, as if she’d given him an opening, “I want to talk to you all about that.”

Mom’s look could have bored a hole in him. “Please don’t say you want to change our lives again, Gil.”

“Well... I’m only asking you to be...” It seemed like Dad was going to say ‘open-minded’ again, but he didn’t. “Just hear me out, okay?” He went to a shelf underneath the globe and found a book that he dropped on the table.

Nick picked it up and looked. The author was Jack Frasier.

“Frasier,” Nick said. “The founder of Venus.”

“I remember.” Mom reached for the book.

“It’s all in there,” Dad said.

“You’ve already read this?” Mom asked, flipping through the pages.

“Twice. I’ve read it twice. It was the weirdest thing, Ann.” Dad sat down on a barstool in the kitchen area, which was only a few feet away from the couch. “I was devastated about the merger at first. Then I remembered reading something about this Venus Project. It’s a whole new concept; no one’s ever tried it before.

“So I drove out here for a visit and applied for residency—for now they’re taking only people with needed skills, so there aren’t many families here yet.” He talked fast, as if he were afraid he wouldn’t get it all said.

“Someday these concepts will support the entire civilization; everyone will live in cities like this one. That’s what Frasier hopes for anyway.”

He leaned back against the bar, waiting for their reaction. Nick didn’t know what to say, so he didn’t say anything. Instead, he focused on a place near his father’s elbow to avoid looking at him, the place

where the counter top separated the kitchen from the rest of the dome.

Growing right up out of the floor, the concrete bar curved outward, creating the oval kitchen. A glossy, turquoise material looked like it had been poured over the top. On that were yellow place mats, four of them. That was where he'd be sitting for breakfast in the morning.

Mom seemed to be thinking over Dad's words. "Residency," she repeated finally. "You *really* should have asked us."

"I guess I should have. I thought... well, I'm asking now," Dad answered. "Sometimes you just know when something is right. I had to jump on this, Ann. I didn't want anything to mess it up." He let out a long breath, and gestured toward the top of the dome. "And here we are."

"Yes, here we are," Mom echoed. "But what's the purpose, exactly? I mean we can't just *stay* here. Come on. There's a real world out there, Gil."

Ooh! That was the reason Dad had given for starting the sod business: The supposed real world required a lot more money than he could make at the university. It had been his argument for everything ever since. *You have to get those grades up, Nick—there's a real world out there. I know I'm gone a lot, Ann, but there's a real world out there and I have to make a living for us. Erika, if you can't even keep your room clean, how do you expect to make it in the real world?*

Dad laced his fingers together and looked down at the pebbly floor. "Okay, I guess I deserve that. What I'm saying now is that we don't have to play the games any more. We can leave the so-called real world behind.

"They're looking for a few more families to move in immediately, and because I have degrees in engineering and horticulture, we qualify. They're even looking for artists, Ann. We can be part of this experiment."

"Oh, Gil, I don't know..."

"We won't sell the house," Dad rushed to say. "Not 'till we're sure. Maybe we can rent it out for a while."

Nick pictured some little kid in his bedroom with the window seat stuffed full of remote control cars, video games and Japanese sea

monsters.

“I can have someone pack us up and put things in storage,” Dad went on. “I’m telling you it’ll be the most fantastic thing we’ve ever done... You won’t be sorry.”

“But that’s what you said before, Gil. Pacific Redi-Lawn was going to be the best thing we’d ever done...”

“I know, I know,” Dad said. “But I really believe this is *different*.”

“Gil...” She raised her arms and dropped them again. “How long?”

Nick glanced quickly at Erika, whose face registered both excitement and panic.

“Well... actually... I’m thinking five years or so,” Dad said. “And then...”

When Mom put her hand to her mouth without answering, he turned to Nick. “What do you think, son?”

Usually, Dad didn’t ask what Nick thought. In fact, the last few years he just told Nick what he *should* think and assumed he’d get in line. This was different, though, and he hesitated, knowing what he said this time might be important.

“Well...” Nick thought about Mrs. Koster and his friend Hank. He thought about the house on Pinewood Drive and the flat screen TV with the DVD that sat in the corner of their living room. He thought about kids like the Neanderthal, how he had been afraid of him every day since third grade, and then he thought about his dad and the dreams that never quite came to be.

“Five years is a long time,” Nick said. “I would be almost 19 when we got out.”

“It’s not a prison,” Dad pointed out. *Prison*, the way John Daniels had first described Venus.

“Could we go back and forth? You know, go back home for the weekends?” Nick already knew the answer.

“Not really,” Dad said. “We won’t have money for plane tickets. Besides, it’s a commitment. If we want to learn a new way of living, we’ll have to *live* it. Every day.”

“But five years... !” Dad never did anything for five years. Erika

would be a teenager too. Nick could hardly fathom that. "How about one year?"

Mom sat back with her arms wrapped around herself, looking like she might run out the door at any second, alligators or not. "Nick is right. Gil, if you really, really want to try this, let's see if we can find a compromise. These commune experiments don't usually work out."

"Venus is not a commune," Dad insisted. "It's the future."

You have just entered the future. That's what the woman's voice had said when they first stepped into this place.

"I have eleven dollars worth of quarters," Erika said. "Will I ever get to spend them?"

"Better than that," Dad told her. "You'll be able to save them forever." He just sat there, leaning back against the counter. Then he said, "Come on, guys, work with me here. This is something I really want to try."

And that was the point where Nick knew they'd be living in Venus, the point where Dad got what he wanted by making everyone feel guilty. Except Nick did not feel guilty in the slightest. He felt excited, though he wasn't sure why.

This might not work out any better than the sod business had. But the weird thing was, he had said he didn't want to go back to school. Now it looked like his wish might actually come true. Skagit had never been the place for him; maybe Venus was.

His parents talked for another hour but it was just a formality. By the time they pushed the buttons on the wall to let the beds down, it had been decided that Nick's suggestion would stand. They'd live in Venus for one year.

A whole year... in a dome! Nick would have to find some way to make it his own. Get some posters maybe and tack them to ... what? Every inch of bare wall was white cement.

"Come on, Erika," he said, being extra nice. When you're eleven, he thought, you just go with the flow.

His sister followed Nick into the room. In the curves of the 'S' wall were built-in seats, one on each side, and below those, cupboards

with sliding doors.

“I want this side,” Erika said, going all the way into the room where the cupboard doors were a pale lavender-pink.

“Okay,” Nick said, “I’ll take green.” Great, he got the one window, too, with the giant bubble just to the right of his bed. A ledge following the curve of the wall on the opposite side of the room held two computer monitors and two keypads. The chairs looked more like adjustable stands topped with black bowls.

“Hey,” Nick said. “Looks like we’re connected—email, Internet. We’ll send messages to everyone we know.” He guessed if there was no money, the cell phones wouldn’t work after a while, so texting would be out.

Erika smiled as if they were in a conspiracy together. Nick didn’t let himself think past tonight. For now, this was an escape from Skagit, and nothing else mattered.

But one thing still niggled at his mind: If Venus was such a great place, why would one kid try so hard to escape on the Radial platform? He hadn’t gotten a chance to ask Curtis about that.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nick woke first and beat Erika into the bathroom. He had skipped the shower the night before, but he'd discovered the toothbrushes, each in a different color, hooked up to a vacuum system. His blue brush first made its own foam, then sucked it away as if he were in a dentist's office.

This was so weird. No, this was so *great!* With sun streaming through a round skylight, Nick undressed happily and stepped into the shower cylinder. A rounded, transparent door silently closed him inside. Feeling along the walls, he waited for something to happen.

There were no faucets—the shiny metal sides looked more like a tea ball punctured by tiny holes—but within a few seconds warm water sprayed from the holes. Then greenish suds blasted him from the neck down. A cold plop fell onto the top of his head, and Nick reached up to feel a cup-sized ball of foam.

Okay, he got the idea: In this *city that thinks*, the domiciles had minds of their own too. Nick washed his hair, knowing what was coming next—the rinse. Water came at him from every direction, including from above. He sputtered and pushed the hair out of his eyes.

When the water suddenly stopped, he stepped out of the shower and looked around for a towel, but, of course, Venus had thought of that too. Warm air from some invisible source spiraled down his body with such force he had to brace himself against the shower door. A quick glance in the mirror told him his hair had been dried, too, into a scarecrow thatch. Too bad the shower hadn't scrubbed away his freckles.

When he was finished, he noticed that his height and weight had been recorded on a postcard-sized computer screen next to the shower opening. On another screen a message scrolled by: "Sodium high. Adjust diet." Sodium meant salt, Nick knew that much. He had eaten salty peanuts and a Coke—soda—on the plane the day before. No doubt the scanners would automatically send him the "adjusted" foods on the

menu tables. And what other body functions were the bathroom computers recording?

When it was Erika's turn, Mom went in with her.

"What's with your hair?" Erika asked.

Nick smoothed it down with his hands. "Nothing. I'll comb it."

So he was living in the future now, even though the hi-tech bathrooms might take a little getting used to.

At 9 a.m. Alana appeared on the footbridge wearing a blue sundress with little straps. Curtis was not with her.

Nick waved, a smile pulling at his face. He watched her cross, the dress standing out like a patch of blue paint against a green jungle background. Erika jumped up from where she'd been sitting on the front porch and waved.

"Good morning," Alana sang out, her voice echoing through the mat of trees.

Feeling very positive, Nick called into the dome for his parents and the five of them were off—down the same path they'd been on the night before. At nine a.m. the air was already humid and bordering on hot.

They passed several ponds covered with green lichen, twigs and leaves. No alligators this morning, though who could tell what was under the surface? Moss, gray as an old lady's hair, hung from the trees. Red and yellow flowers poked out everywhere. They followed the path to the moving sidewalk, and from there made their way back to the Number Four Radial.

Nat checked his cell phone for text messages from Hank—6 a.m. in Skagit, he'd still be asleep. He sent one of his own: *On our way through the jungle to orientation... more later. N.*

When they reached the Central Dome, Alana led them past the huge holographic globe to an elevator that she called a *Transveyor* that took them upstairs several floors.

There were no buttons, just a panel where Alana directed her voice. “Orientation please.” When they reached the third floor, the Transveyor moved sideways and they all stepped off directly in front of a wide metal door decorated with leaf patterns that appeared to sway in a breeze.

“I wonder how this works.” Erika spread both palms on the door as if she were trying to stop it from moving.

No one answered her. “Okay, this is the place,” Alana said. “I hope you don’t mind if I leave you now and come back later. I’ve been through this a hundred times.”

“Oh, no of course not,” Dad said.

She flashed all of them a smile and got back on the Transveyor. Had she smiled at Nick just a little longer than at the others?

Only about a dozen people milled around outside the doors—a man in a flowered shirt, another wearing a suit, women in dresses or jeans and one carrying a little girl.

Slouching against the wall was the fat kid from the day before. Of course, he would be there.

Today he was dressed in sloppy pants and a shirt that hung down to his knees, still carrying his metal box. He scowled in Nick’s direction before the door slid open and everyone went into the coolness of an air-conditioned room. Nick could feel the kid crowding in behind him, breathing, oozing hostility.

Curved stairs descended in tiers to a platform where a single stool waited in the center of a bluish light. The Hammonds moved down several levels where they lined up together on steps covered with a cork-like, spongy material.

The moment Nick’s body connected with the cork, the surface moved around until it became a seat that conformed to his shape. His mother jumped up as if something had grabbed her. Dad laughed. One after another, people commented as they sat down on the soft stairs.

In an almost empty auditorium, the kid and his family managed to settle directly behind the Hammonds. Nick felt body heat on the back of his neck, and he pulled in his shoulders. He wondered if the steps were built to accommodate anyone, of any size.

“This is creepy,” the kid said. Was he talking about the steps? “I’m not sticking around for this. They’ll never know if I’m here or not.”

Thwack!

“Quit it, Ardith,” the kid complained.

“Just sit down and be quiet,” a woman said. “It’s only two hours.”

That must have been the mother talking. Nick forced his eyes straight ahead. The kid was still thinking escape. Obviously, like Alana had said, not everyone was thrilled to be in Venus.

The doors behind them closed, lights went out for just a moment, and when they came on again, a small man of about forty stood on the platform in front of the stool. He was dressed in khaki pants and shirtsleeves rolled up above his elbows. Wearing a hat with a wide brim, he smiled at the group showing very white teeth.

“Good morning,” he said in a gentle voice, “I’m Jack Frasier.”

The Founder, Nick thought. He was shorter than Nick would have thought, but somehow powerful looking. The bluish aura followed the man as he walked back and forth across the platform.

“If you’ll look off to your right,” Frasier said, “you’ll see my beautiful associate, Rachel Mathews. Just pretend I’m not even here—she’s the one who does most of the work around here.”

People chuckled and turned to look. Standing by the doors with her hands behind her back was a lady with long brown hair, wearing slacks and a silky blouse. She nodded and smiled.

Mr. Frasier sat down on the stool and folded tan hands over one knee. He looked so casual, as if nothing ever bothered him at all. “What

you have entered into here is a new kind of society—a global vision of hope for the future of humankind.”

Nick squirmed. The words themselves brought visions of great importance. Nick glanced at his father’s profile, lit up by the glow from the platform. It seemed like thoughts of grass were a long way off.

“The systems here will seem strange at first,” Frasier said. A wall-sized map appeared behind him where scenes played from around the world—bony people on dirty beds, little kids holding out bowls while flies buzzed around their faces, an American-looking kid with a gun.

“We have enough resources on this planet to erase every one of these pictures,” he said. “What we don’t have enough of, and will never have enough of, is money. Erase the money, erase the pictures.”

Jack Frasier sounded like he was reading from a script, though Nick saw no notes or teleprompters. Still, Alana had said that there were orientations every two hours, even if only one person showed up. That was a lot of talking.

Frasier kept talking, hardly pausing between sentences. A snicker came from behind and Nick turned around. With a round face and knees the size of cantaloupes, the boy seemed to hover over him like a helium balloon. Nick turned away.

Mr. Frasier didn’t seem to notice but went right on with his presentation. He explained that rare things like diamonds cost a lot of money, while ordinary things that you can get anywhere are cheap. So to make sure things are always expensive, companies never produce enough.

“They’re not bad people,” Frasier said. “That’s the way the world works.” He turned and looked straight out at the audience and paused as if he were posing for a camera.

“Except in Venus,” he went on. “The world doesn’t work that way in Venus because this is a resource-based society. That is, based on materials and goods, not money. We have enough of everything for everyone. And, ladies and gentlemen, the people who live in this first

city of the future are going to prove that new ideas can work. The children here will be the citizens of a world that can finally sustain itself.”

Nick had always had *enough*, so he’d never given it much thought, and he felt a little ashamed of that now. The kid behind him snickered.

Frasier got up and paced across the platform again, folding his arms over his chest as if he’d practiced that way. “I’m here to tell you that this may be our last chance. The world is in turmoil, our environment is on the verge of collapse, and our very monetary system has begun to implode.”

The man’s ominous tone made goose bumps rise on Nick’s arms. Mrs. Koster at school was always talking about things like that, putting up charts that showed the size of the national debt, how much coral had died or how many polar bears were left, but it was never clear how worried people should be.

His father had never mentioned it before; he just went right on growing new crops of grass and people kept buying instant lawn. Nick glanced up, hoping to read his expression, but his father’s eyes were riveted on Jack Frasier.

The man talked for over an hour about his reasons why Venus had to work. Nick wondered if he’d memorized the book Dad had shown them—he talked almost without taking a breath, and Nick missed a lot of it.

The pictures behind him changed every couple of minutes and ended up showing some of his plans for the future—a lot more cities linked by magnetic levitation trains, and even a network of cities anchored under the sea.

Nick tried to listen carefully. Everything looked so advanced—circular pods connected by windowed tubes, bubble roofs, and slips for ships. *Sea cities!* Nick had never seen anything like it. This was better than bases on the moon! A tingle crawled up his back, and he laced his

fingers together, then rubbed his arms—anything to make sure he really was sitting here in a place called Venus.

“But there’s a different way to live,” Frasier said, “and the people of Venus are going to be the first to try it out.”

Dad seemed riveted on the stage. Every few minutes he flashed a smile down at Nick. He looked excited, as if he had founded Venus himself.

Then Rachel Mathews walked to the front and the lights went out on the platform and Mr. Frasier. “This city is a work in progress,” she said. “You’re going to love the new technologies that are on their way. As time goes on, more scientists will join us.”

She didn’t sound like she was reading the way Jack Frasier did. She talked about unusual bridges and new improved foods and ways to make copies of anything in nature with nothing but nanotechnology. “Ladies, our weight is going to be perfect—none of us will be over or under weight. Vastly improved health will be guaranteed, not just for the few, but for all of us.”

Several people clapped. Rachel Mathews nodded and went on. “We invite all of you to be your best here, to achieve anything you have ever dreamed.”

“What a crock!”

Nick refused to turn around again.

“Check this out.” The woman held up one of the fat wrist watches Nick had seen. “You will all receive your Teleguides this morning,” she told them. “You’re free to wear them on your wrist or not.” Nick thought she glanced in the kid’s direction. “But let me tell you some of the advantages.”

She explained that the Teleguides could answer questions about where you were in Venus, function as a cell telephone, monitor your blood pressure, or alert you to storms that were coming.

“In fact, I see we could get rain tonight,” she said. “And, the Teleguides plug into an extensive library system where you can borrow almost any item that you don’t actually need to own. It’s nice, actually.” She smiled. “I borrow art work and sculptures for my home and change them every month or so. But I do have my own toothbrush.”

The audience laughed. Nick assumed they’d all tried their bathrooms by now, and discovered the toothbrushes.

Mathews talked about how you could order practically anything you needed through the computer in your domicile or apartment and then it would be delivered through an underground transport system. Even clean clothes. Garbage went back the same way. Everything was underground.

“I’ll bet it smells down there,” the kid chortled.

Now Erika turned around. “Hey, I’m listening; do you mind?”

“Erika...” Mom shook her head in disapproval, but Nick smiled.

A woman’s voice said, “Pay attention, Peyton, you may need to know this.”

Peyton... what a name, Nick thought.

Ignoring the chatter, Rachel Mathews said, “Some of you have been asking about schools.”

Nick perked up. This was what he wanted to know.

Mathews referred to a picture behind her of a class of third- or fourth-graders all looking like they were bored into trances. Then the picture changed to an older kid who was actually asleep at his desk. Someone else snickered. It all looked so familiar.

Then she said, “You may have heard that there are no schools in Venus. It’s not true. What *is* true is that we have no classrooms. We believe that learning should be exciting. The city of Venus is in itself a school, so classrooms as you know them are unnecessary.”

So it was true. Kids here really didn’t go to school. Beside him,

Nick figured his mother's eyebrow had popped up, while he smiled to himself. No classrooms meant no Neanderthals, no closed rooms that smelled like socks, no potato-wiener casserole.

"No schools?" Erika whispered as if it were the worst news she'd ever heard.

Nick focused on Rachel Mathews, hoping she meant every word. She talked about "gatherings" that took the place of regular classrooms. She said anyone could find out about them on the computer. All you had to do was figure out what you were interested in.

No school. Had Dad known about this? Now Nick was very sure he wanted to stay in Venus, maybe for the rest of his life.

At the end of Orientation, the lights came on fully and people made a lot of noise standing up and making their way to the doors. Nick was not sure where Jack Frasier had gone—he was no longer on the platform, but Rachel stayed there for people who crowded around to talk to her. Nick had a million questions, but he knew only vaguely what they were.

He followed his family up the stairs and back into the upstairs hall. On a table just outside the door were the Teleguides, arranged in rows. There must have been fifty of them. It occurred to Nick that he could take two, in case he lost one. But remembering what Frasier had said about plenty, he took just one and strapped it on his wrist. The Teleguide was nothing more than a small screen.

Erika fastened hers and started poking at it. "Testing, testing."

Someone must have answered.

"Who's this?" Erika asked.

If she wore it out could she just get another one? What if she broke it?

"So, what do you think?" Dad led them away from the group of people to shiny black stone that had been chiseled out to form a bench. "What he says makes lawn sound pretty insignificant, doesn't it?"

“I don’t know,” Mom said. She ran her hands through her hair and sat down. “After I got used to it, I thought we had a pretty good life, Gil. I know about climate change and all that, but he makes it all sound so *dire*.”

“All you have to do is read the news.” Dad stood over her with his arms crossed.

Erika kept playing with her Teleguide. “What’s my blood pressure?” *Poke. Poke.* “How far away is the moon?”

“You know, Gil, if these warnings turn out to be cyclical after all, Jack Frasier’s message is going to fall flat. Anyway, you never worried about this kind of thing before. What if you wake up in the morning and miss being in business? I don’t know...”

Dad’s hands moved up in a frustrated gesture. “Look, if the merger had gone through... It’s just that...” He seemed to be looking for the perfect words. Then his face registered a completely different thought. “Some of those machines out there are twenty years ahead of their time, Ann.”

“I don’t care about machines,” Erika interrupted. “If there are no schools, how will we get into college?” She lifted her wrist and asked the Teleguide, “How will we get into college?”

Erika had said “we,” as if it were a given that Nick would even want to go to college too. Well, he’d see about that. The Teleguide answered something, but Mom was already talking again.

“Good point,” she said. “For all we know, Gil, these *gatherings* are not even accredited.”

“I’m quite sure they’re accredited. Or they give tests. Or something.”

Nick moved away from the family, toward a sculpted white dish that was a drinking fountain. At the same time, Peyton stepped in front of him and bent over the stream of water. It was no coincidence.

Sluurpp! He wiped his chin with the back of his big, pink hand and turned toward Nick. “So, what grade you in?”

“Ninth.” None of your business, Nick thought.

“Yeah, me too.” Peyton gave his pants a hoist. “What a bunch of baloney in there, huh?”

“I don’t know,” Nick said. He leaned back against the wall without taking a drink. “Maybe.”

“Well, I’m not going down this road, man. I’ll be outa here tomorrow.”

You already tried that, Nick wanted to say.

The girl he’d been with walked over to them. “You’re not going anywhere, Peyton, not ‘till Mom says you can.” The girl had a round face and big arms coming out of a too-small shirt—all in the family, Nick thought.

The kid laughed nervously in Nick’s direction. “That’s what you think, Ardith. I’ve got a lot of stuff and I’m not turning it in just so people can check it out of any library.”

Nick did a quick inventory of his one bag. There wasn’t much in it. “What kind of stuff are you talking about?”

“Well, for starters I’ve got an iPod with a whole load of songs and movies, a stopwatch, a couple of knives... and my rats.”

“Rats?” Nick glanced at the box, sitting now against the wall. Through one of the holes he could see something moving.

The kid smirked. “I’ve been training those guys and I’m NOT giving them away.”

“You can keep your stupid rats, okay,” Ardith said with a look of disgust. “Like someone’s going to check out a rat. I’m so sure.”

Alana appeared and Nick smiled in her direction. “Well, see you.” Saved, Nick thought. He felt Peyton’s eyes on him as he walked the four

paces to join her. Yep, I know her, Nick wished he could say. Hot, isn't she?

"Was that the boy we saw at the Radial?" Mom asked.

"Yep. He was the one who sat behind us in there too. His name's Peyton; he's in ninth."

Dad made a sound that said, *Oh, him*, and draped an arm around Nick's shoulders, leaving little warm spots where his fingers touched.

Nick looked down at his arm, wondering if this time his dad had found the real thing, or if this would just be temporary too. Then he stopped himself. So far everything in Venus seemed different. From professor, to sod mogul, to VenusMan. It was only fair that he give his father the benefit of the doubt.

Before they got back on the Transveyor, Nick saw Peyton squirt water out of the spigot onto the wall. It made dark streaks as it trickled down onto the floor. Nick watched him and thought about Paul the Neanderthal, and he thought about his father.

Venus might be different, but some things were the same no matter where you were. Still, Nick was feeling good today. Maybe even *positive*. He wasn't going to think about Peyton, because that would make it very hard to believe that his life had actually taken a giant leap forward.

CHAPTER NINE

The courtyard sparkled with sunlight—white domes, blue water, and the shapes of people moving along the paths or between the curved structures. A rainbow arched over one of the fountains where mist hung in the air. How could any place be better than this? Nick felt it in his bones. Whatever force had guided his father here must have been tuned into Nick too.

Far above the treetops another of the helicopter-like craft hovered. Looking more like a UFO than a plane, the disc and circular blur of wings drifted from right to left and back. Finally, it tilted and swooped away.

After hearing Jack Frasier and Rachel Mathews, Nick felt like the world had somehow become much bigger, more open. He suspected his father felt the same, by the way he walked along his hands in his pants pockets, stopping every few feet to squint into the sky. It seemed like he ought to be whistling for the happy look on his face.

Nick was suddenly tempted to move over where he could give him a quick hug, but that had not seemed okay for so long that he shook off the feeling.

“Well, that’s about it for orientation,” Alana said. She walked backward, facing them, her blue dress tickling her knee just above her tattoo. “Jack and Rachel don’t have time to cover everything. Do you have any questions?”

“A million of them,” Mom said. “How do I cook—surely we don’t have to eat off the menu every meal.”

“My mom never cooks,” Alana said with a laugh, “but you can use the keyboard on your refrigerator door to order groceries. It’s kind of slow, though. Like twenty minutes sometimes.”

“That’s not bad,” Mom said.

“And you can always ask your Teleguide or log on to a computer. The best part is, you’ll have time to do anything you want now.”

“That’s hard to imagine,” Dad said.

“Venus is all about time. That’s what Rachel Mathews says.” Alana smiled in Nick’s direction. She was always doing that and he liked it.

He didn’t care about cooking either, but he considered what she said. People talked about spending time, as if it were money. Except there was no money in Venus. Maybe there wasn’t any time either, or maybe there was an endless supply. What would his father do now without Pacific Redi-Lawn to think about? What would Nick himself do without school?

“I think I’d like to get some art supplies,” Mom announced suddenly. “Can you point us in the right direction?”

“Use your Teleguide,” Alana urged her.

Mom held up her wrist. “Hello... where can I get art supplies?” The Teleguide spoke back and Mom smiled at it as if it were a real person. “Thanks. That was easy. Art supplies in E Dome, right over there.” She pointed to the right of the Central Dome.

“Told you so,” Alana said and edged away. Her pale eyes smiled. “Okay, I need to go greet a new group of residents. Will you be okay by yourselves?”

Dad tapped his wrist. “Just use the Teleguide, right?”

“Exactly,” Alana said. “I think you’ve got it.”

Everyone said goodbye and Alana jogged away in her blue dress, her hair swinging, down the path toward the Radial. Would Nick get to see her again? She had said there weren’t many kids in Venus, so he guessed he would. What an amazing girl.

They passed the Central Dome and went into E Dome. Paints, brushes, canvases, easels, colored papers, erasers, pencils—every imaginable kind of art supplies—were displayed on shelves that radiated out from the middle of the dome. In the very top was a skylight, much

like the one in their domicile, washing the whole place in sunlight.

“Oh, my,” Mom said. “What do I do? Just *take* things?”

For a couple of minutes the Hammonds stood near the entryway and watched other people come into E Dome and load up wire baskets with whatever they needed. When they were finished, they stopped at a sort of bagging station, put their things in mesh bags and left.

This was amazing. Even though Nick knew now how the no-money system worked, this still looked like stealing. You didn’t just walk out of stores without paying or signing a receipt—it just wasn’t done. Except in Venus, and he was already wondering what he could get for himself.

His mother took a basket and started walking up and down the aisles. She picked out a dozen tubes of paint, six or eight brushes, and several canvases in different sizes.

“After this first time, I won’t need quite so much,” she said, as if she were apologizing. “This’ll get me started.”

She loaded it all into a large bag and the Hammonds walked out. With a big smile, Mom lifted her bag up and down several times as if she were testing its weight.

“Is there anything you need, Nicker?” Dad asked.

“Sure,” Nick said hopefully, “a car.”

“Well, let’s see if we can find out how to get you one.”

Nick felt his face split into a grin. “Really? You aren’t afraid I’ll, you know... wreck it?”

“That’s one of the things we’ll find out.” Dad examined his Teleguide. “Let’s see, if I touch ‘Broadcast’ you will all be able to hear.” He tapped the screen. “Uh, yes, my son here is fourteen? He wants to drive one of the small cars we’ve seen around the Central Dome. Where do we borrow one of those?”

The now-familiar female voice answered, “Proximity Mechanized

cars are located at intervals along Radial routes. PMs are voice-activated and can be used to move throughout the city by any person registered at Venus.”

Nick felt his heart leap with possibilities, tempered with a wave of nervousness. He’d never before driven anything more complex than a bicycle, unless he counted the tractor out on the sod fields, which he had driven just once. His father had taken over when he mowed down some wooden pallets.

“Proximity,” Dad said. “Maybe it tells you when there’s another car nearby.”

“A safety feature,” Mom said. “I guess that could be all right. We’ll pass right by the PM station on the way home, okay Nick?”

“Okay, sure.” *On their way home.* It was just beginning to sink in with Nick that they were staying here, and that this round city was now home.

“It’s my turn, then,” Erika said. “I want to get a dress like Alana’s.”

“A dress? Are you sure?” Mom asked. “You never wear anything but jeans.”

Dad spoke to the Teleguide again. “Girls’ clothing?” Erika clasped her hands together and laughed, or rather chortled, as if she were planning to take home the whole store.

Both of Mom’s eyebrows went up at once.

“I’m told newcomers get over this,” Dad said, “wanting everything the first day. It wears off.”

Nick wasn’t into shopping for girls’ clothes. “Uh, how about I go back into the Central Dome and see if Jack Frasier is there?”

His parents hesitated, than Dad said, “Sure, why not? Let’s meet back out here in, say, an hour.”

Set free, Nick ran back to the CD. He hoped he wasn't too late. He ran past the giant globe and into the Transveyor. "Orientation," he said, testing the system. With an upward and then a sideways motion the Transveyor arrived back at the same place where the Hammonds had been just a short time ago, except the other people were now gone.

He opened the door a crack. There sat Jack Frasier on the same stool he had occupied earlier, still wearing his hat. Nick stepped into the auditorium.

"Hello, Nick Hammond," Frasier said.

Startled, Nick asked, "How do you know my name?"

"Your face has scanned," the man said. "Come on down. We can talk."

Nick moved down the steps cautiously. Now that he was here, he wasn't sure how to begin.

"Do you have a question?" The man's blue eyes seemed almost to look all the way through Nick.

What's my question? Nick thought nervously. "I guess I was wondering about materials to build things," he said. "You said Venus is based on goods, not money, but where do the materials come from?"

Frasier turned slightly and shifted one hand on top of the other. "Venus is an experimental city," he said, "that means we're a city in transition. Eventually, the entire world will be free of money and all the problems it causes." He spoke slowly and clearly as if he thought Nick might not get it. "But for now, we depend on donations and grants."

Nick nodded his understanding.

Frasier added, "This year we expect to create fifty percent of the goods we need ourselves. More next year. What else do you want to know?"

Nick wanted to know everything about Venus, but that would take hours. "Why is everything around her shaped like a dome?"

“Well, the dome shape uses the least amount of materials, and almost nothing can destroy a concrete dome—not insects, fire—we believe they can even survive a hurricane.”

“But aren’t domes kind of heavy? I mean, what if one caves in?”

“They’re not heavy at all. Our domes are made of pre-stressed, reinforced concrete with a flexible ceramic external coating. They have a very thin shell.”

As if the words had come from a sales brochure, it sounded good, but Nick knew that Florida got plenty of storms. “Have you ever had a hurricane In Venus?” he asked. It seemed like there were a lot of trees still standing.

Frasier’s answer surprised him. “Not yet. We’re far inland, but we’ll have to test that theory, won’t we?” Then he adjusted his hat and looked toward Nick as if someone were standing directly behind him.

Nick glanced over his shoulder—no one else was in the room—and back to Frasier. Something seemed strange, but he couldn’t decide what that was.

“I hope you will come back and talk to me again?” the man said.

Dismissed, Nick thought. “Okay, I will. Maybe tomorrow.”

“That would be very nice. Goodbye, Nick.”

Nick turned and went back up the steps. Next time he’d write down some of his questions. He’d had dozens a while ago, but faced with Frasier himself, he’d forgotten what they were.

Outside again, Nick sat on the edge of one of the fountains and waited. As he surveyed the courtyard, he saw Peyton walking around alone, whacking at the shrubs as he passed. As he drew closer, he recognized Nick and slowed down as if he were planning to stop and talk.

At the same time, Mom, Dad and Erika showed up early. Peyton grumbled something and moved on

“What’s with him?” Erika frowned in his direction.

“Who knows?” Nick said. Good riddance. Nick watched Peyton lumber away, wondering what he was up to, then gave him no further thought. “That was a quick shopping trip,” he said to Erika. “Where are the packages?”

Erika’s expression had already changed to one of complete happiness. “I don’t need any. It’s being delivered. Guess what I’m getting? Dresses, shoes, a new swimming suit...”

“You should have seen this system,” Dad said. “Your sister picked out clothes through a computerized mirror that somehow reflected the outfits on her.”

Mom explained that it was just like trying on clothes without undressing, “And everything will be at the dome by the time we get there.”

Already nothing surprised Nick.

“It was so cool,” Erika put in. “You should try it, Nick.”

Not likely; his jeans and two pair of shorts were enough until they wore out.

“What next?” Dad said.

“The cars,” Nick reminded him.

“Let’s go.” The family headed back toward the Radial. Walking a little distance beyond the ramps, Nick saw about twenty Proximity Mechanized cars, PMs, parked along the road.

A man got into a red car, a bubble top closed over him, and he moved out of the space and onto the road. As he moved past the Hammonds, Nick noticed that there was no steering wheel.

No steering wheel? Nick froze. How could you drive a car without a steering wheel? He’d crash the car for sure!

A girl approached and got into another of the cars. Off she went. It

couldn't be that hard, Nick thought. Still he did not want to look foolish, getting into a car that would just sit there.

"Want to take a ride with me?" Nick asked hopefully, addressing his question to no one in particular.

"Why not?" Dad said, "Let's give it a whirl."

"Okay." He hadn't exactly been thinking of Dad. Now he felt an attack of negativity coming on. With a nervous stomach, he chose a white car with a black stripe along its length. The smooth design looked futuristic with one wheel in the back and two in front. He lifted up the bubble top as he'd seen the others do.

"Go ahead," Dad said, indicating the seat on the left where the steering wheel usually was. Nick slid down into the driver's seat and looked out across the dash sloping smoothly to meet the bubble of glass.

Dad fit his tall body into the other seat and pulled in his shoulders. As soon as the bubble closed, a voice said, "Please speak your name."

Nick hesitated, then said, "Nick Hammond." He ran sweaty hands down the legs of his jeans.

"Thank-you, Nick. Your voice is recognized. You may proceed. If you prefer to maintain the PM in good operating condition, you may garage it at your domicile. If you do not wish to maintain the vehicle or do not have the expertise to do so, please return the PM to any parking facility. This message will not repeat in the future."

Nick had no idea how to change oil, but he always figured he'd learn. On the dashboard was a diagram of Venus with numbers printed at various locations. The very middle, the Central Dome, was numbered One.

"Okay," Nick said, looking over the diagram and glancing at his father. "How about we go... out there?" He pointed to an area that was mostly green, a park maybe.

Unexpectedly, the car began to move. "Wait," Nick said. "I'm not

ready..." The car stopped.

"This system is really sensitive!" Dad exclaimed. "Let's start over."

Nick took a deep breath. "Okay. Please take us to Gamma Ring, Quadrant Seven."

Again the car began to move out of its place in line and onto the road.

Erika waved.

"Good visibility," Dad commented when the PM picked up speed.

Nick felt himself smile as he looked up at the blue sky through the bubble top. So far, so good. They headed outward on the rings of Venus, through an area that seemed to be apartment buildings. In and out of shadows they sped as they moved between structures.

Another car approached from a side road and pulled in smoothly behind Nick. Up ahead were several other cars, all moving at the same speed.

Feeling almost comfortable now, Nick hooted, "Wow, this is like being inside a video game."

"But without the crashes," Dad said. "Hopefully."

They sailed over a waterfall and around a clump of trees. Nick held his breath, trusting the technology to be as advanced as it looked. They skirted the rows of oddly- shaped buildings, combinations of towers, and glass balconies. A shadow fell over their PM as a helicopter churned by overhead.

Nick was just beginning to relax when he looked up ahead. "What's that?" A half mile or so away was a cluster of other cars in an array of different metallic colors.

He scanned the dashboard wondering how to slow the PM. With no steering wheel, he didn't know how to go around another car. His heart

began to pound, and beside him he felt his father stiffen.

“Oh-oh, what do I do?” Nick watched the cars grow larger as he approached at breakneck speed. “Stop” Nick told the car, but it did not obey his command.

“You are 2.4 miles from your destination,” the voice informed him.

Nick’s attention was both on an impending collision and on his father, who had to be thinking this had been a big mistake.

“Ooh-oh!” The scared sound came, not from Nick, but from his dad.

CHAPTER TEN

Nick braced himself as their PM lifted up. In one second flat they were eye level with the top of a palm tree. Fronds brushed the side of the car as it swished by.

Dad clutched the side of the car.

“Look, that silver car is going right under us.” Now he remembered, Nick had seen this same thing happen near the Central Dome the day before, but he’d assumed the driver had been in control, had pushed a button. There was no button. He peered down at the ground while his stomach caught up.

After the silver PM slid underneath, their white car settled again on the road without losing speed. They zipped along, slowing and making a right angle turn at an intersection, then picking up speed again and traveling along one of the curved roads circling Venus. Finally, without any help from Nick, the car pulled in at a station with other cars, and their bubble top opened.

Nick let out his breath and sat for a minute, marveling at the fact that he hadn’t plowed through a park bench or anything else that was solid.

His father unfolded himself and got out. “Wow, that was quite a ride.”

“Yeah, I love it.” Nick hadn’t loved it at first, but now he did, now that they were parked. Something more to tell Hank. They had come to a stop near an area that appeared to be under construction.

“Your mother shouldn’t have a problem with your using these PMs; they seem entirely safe.”

“I can go all over Venus by myself, right?”

“I don’t see why not,” Dad said. “Just check in once in a while.”

Nick smiled so wide he felt his skin stretch. Proximity Mechanized cars were worth the trip to Venus. A way to do some things on his own, without parents or teachers breathing down his neck.

He turned to see where they had landed. “I wonder what they’re

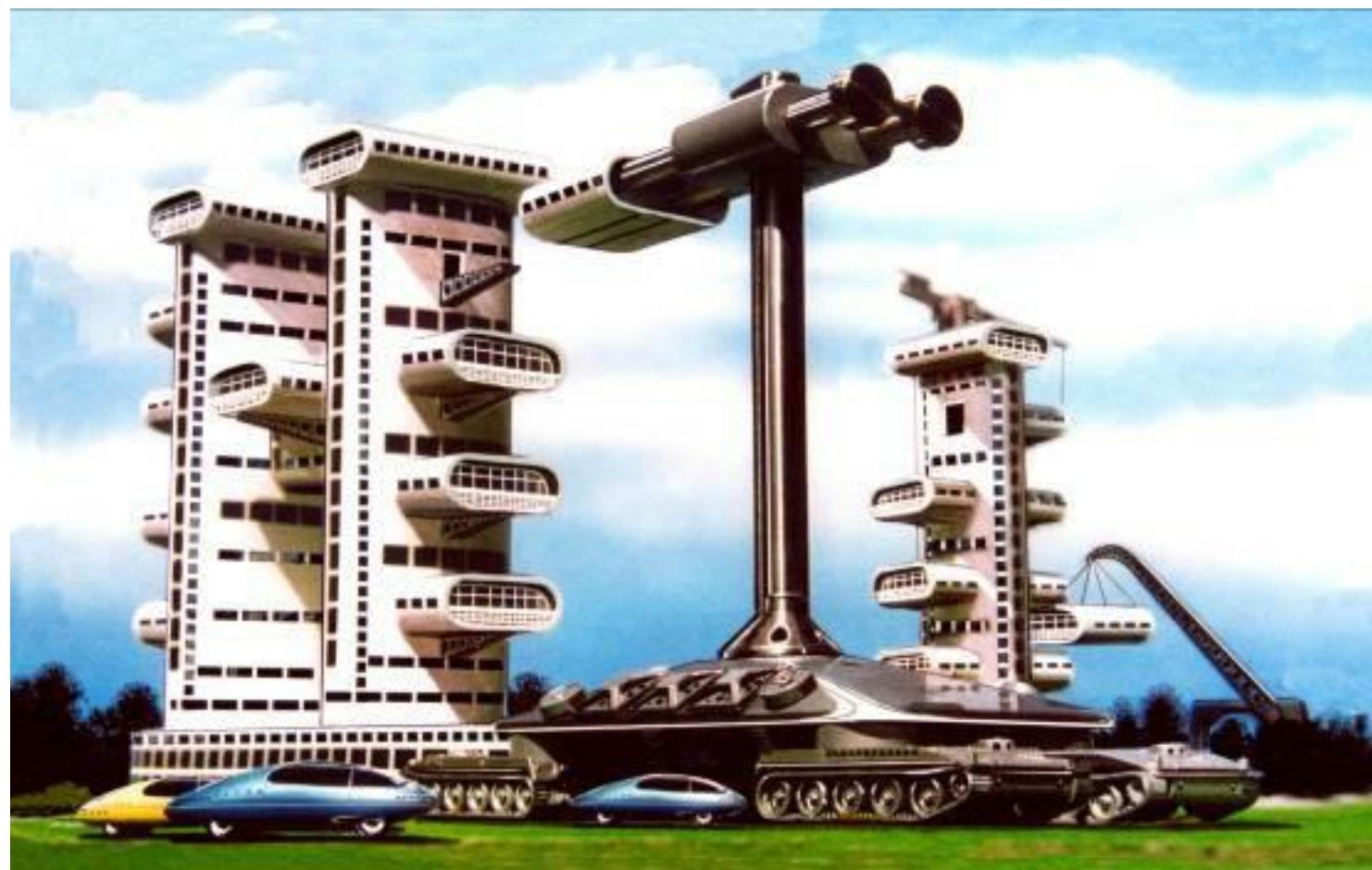
building," Nick said, pointing toward a cluster of large machines.

"I don't know; let's take a look." Dad cupped his hand around Nick's neck and smiled.

Nick smiled back. One time his father had taken him camping, just the two of them in a small tent, and it had felt this same way—special. Dad hadn't always been hard to get along with.

They crossed a grassy area and approached the construction site. The only people around were the few who had gathered to watch in front of a chain link fence.

At one end of a bulldozed area was a machine that looked like an enormous cannon. From it a white bar pushed out, maybe fifteen feet in diameter, wide enough for a house to sit inside. Along the sides, oval-shaped holes had been carved out. When the bar grew long enough, another machine cut off the end.



A third machine lifted the piece away and took it to a tall white column where it fit the newly-cut section onto a metal beam.

This was so cool! Nick could hardly believe what he was seeing, yet it seemed obvious enough: These machines were building an

apartment complex, and it was as easy as snapping Legos together. What was more, the machines seemed to know exactly how to do it all by themselves. There were no workers anywhere—automated, just as Alana had told them.

Nick and his father stood quietly watching for fifteen minutes. During that time, one of the mega-machines rolled on tank-like treads back and forth between the “cannon” and the new building three times.

With each trip, the apartment complex grew one story taller. With each snap of a part, Nick was more convinced that he had found the right place for him. He just wished he could be sure it was really his and not some temporary whim of his dad’s.

Nick hooked his fingers through the links of fence. If only there were a way to get closer. He wanted to see one of those machines up close, and see exactly how they worked. “It’s so fast,” he commented. “This building’s going to be up before dark.”

“Yep, I think you’re right,” Dad answered. “I’m telling you, Nick, Venus makes complete sense. Frasier’s books says the machines memorize how to do their tasks. If a change has to be made, once is enough. After that these behemoths simply remember.”

Dad sounded sure enough, but he’d been that way about sod too. “I wonder what happens if something goes wrong.” Nick meant with the machines, not with his father. “You know, like a part breaking or something.” Another apartment slid into place with a loud snapping sound.

“I don’t know,” Dad said. “That would be a good question for Jack Frasier.”

Treads rolled, the machine arm turned, the cannon pushed out another section. “These machines are too big for a regular town like Skagit,” Nick observed.

“And they’d be too expensive.” Dad kept watching, his eyes following the machines back and forth. “Besides, a process like this would put a lot of people out of work. We have to remember, most of the world is still based on money.”

“I guess we’re lucky to be here.” Nick felt it at the very core of

himself. Mrs. Koster had ever mentioned anyplace like this. She probably didn't even know about Venus, no one seemed to. Maybe they wouldn't care if they did.

They watched a while longer, then headed back toward the PMs. Nick looked up and down the row. "Someone took our car. Well, I mean... you know."

Dad laughed. "We don't own things here. It's one of the realities that will take a little getting used to. But that's okay. I get the impression that sensors will put air in the tires for us and probably perform a lot of other functions too."

Nick picked a red car for the return trip and they were off. He would go back to Gamma-Seven by himself later, he decided, maybe in time to see the machines put the tops on these buildings.

"Alpha-One," Nick said, feeling like an expert. They flew over intersections several times, taking Nick's stomach with it each time. Up ahead sprawled the Central Dome, but before they could travel that far, their red PM zipped in at the port. A dozen people were there, getting in or out of cars, or just waiting. Mom and Erika were not among them.

Dad got out and stood scanning the area, looking annoyed. Then a metallic, green car slid into a parking place with Mom and Erika under the bubble top, wildly waving at them. Nick was not happy.

"It looked fun," Mom said, working her way out of the vehicle, "but I think I prefer the Radial. We just did a quick circle around the city."

"You don't really *drive* it," Erika said, sounding disappointed. "What fun is that?"

Good, Nick thought. He wanted the PMs to be his alone, and it looked like they would be.

The family was laughing and smiling by the time they headed back to Domicile 84. Dad had said they'd get over it, the shopping part at least, but for now Nick couldn't imagine a life better than what they had in Venus. They got off Radial Four and walked along the path on Epsilon Ring, Mom commenting on every flower, Erika skipping ahead and jumping to grab at the vines.

Nick let himself feel happy. Maybe this was the real world, he

decided, not what he'd lived back home in Skagit. He watched his dad looking up into the sky, taking big breaths as if he were filling up his lungs for the very first time. He let himself believe that this change really could be permanent. So what if Venus was just an experiment; sometimes experiments worked out just like they were supposed to.

Then thoughts of Skagit reminded Nick of Hank. Hank still thought the Hammonds were on a vacation, and Nick needed to let him know the latest developments.

Back in Dome 84 Nick logged on to the computer on his side of the room and typed in hankster5, Hank's e-mail address. He had so much to tell, yet no words to describe his last two days—Alana, Jack Frasier, Dome 84, the machines and PM cars.

It took twenty minutes to compose his letter, which in the end said only that he wouldn't be back. "See you sometime, buddy." With vague sadness, he clicked on Send and away the message went. Without an account, he wasn't going to be able to text anyone outside of Venus.

"So what do you think?" a girl's voice asked.

Nick turned around to find Erika standing in the rounded doorway wearing a shimmery body suit.

"Wow!" Nick exclaimed. "You look so... nice." Erika shot him a smile. 'Old' he had almost said. His sister looked taller somehow, too, with her entire body so well defined by the suit. But no way would he tell her that.

After dinner, which the Hammonds ordered from the table, a phone sounded. The melodic ring seemed to be coming from everywhere at once.

"Great," Mom said, "we forgot to ask about the phone."

Finally Dad simply looked up at the ceiling and said, "Hello." Nick could hear nothing, but his father then said, "Sure, that would be great. We'd love to," as if the voice was directed straight into his ear. When he was done he laughed. "That was Burt Beeman, Alana's father. He wants us to come over to their dome for conversation. That's what he called it."

"Really? That would be nice," Mom said. "If we have to be here

for a whole year, we may as well make a few friends."

The bee, Nick thought. "So that's why Alana has a bee on her leg. It's her name."

"I should get a pig tattoo," Erika said. It took Nick a minute to figure out what she was talking about.

It was dark when they left the dome, with only the little solar lights to show them the way, and Nick couldn't avoid thinking about alligators. They didn't have far to go; just across the footbridge and a hundred feet or so down the path to the left, but from Dome 84 the area they would have to cross looked like dense jungle. The Hammonds all seemed to be thinking the same thing as they hurried along, up and over the bridge.

Dad changed the subject by stopping and pointing upward. "Check out the stars." There were so many tiny dots that they looked like they would bump into each. "It's not right when life gets so busy you don't even notice stars any more."

Nick had always noticed them. In fact, his dad had once accused him of having his head in the stars. He looked upward, wondering if somewhere, someone else lived out there, maybe in a city something like Venus.

Everyone stood quietly for a minute, then Mom broke the mood by saying, "Maybe we should drop crumbs so we can find our way back."

Suddenly, a thin beam of light shot across their path. "Oh!" Erika said, sounding startled. "My Teleguide is a flashlight. I just pushed this little yellow button on the side."

Everyone commented on Erika's intelligence, then turned on their Teleguide flashlights—four light beams moved together, at times criss-crossing each other, into the Venus jungle.

The Beeman's domicile crouched in a clearing of trees and was shaped like dumbbells with two sections, one big and one small, connected by a glassed-in walkway. Instead of bubble portholes like the Hammonds had, a band of oblong windows encircled the main dome. A great tongue of white concrete reached out in front forming a carport or porch.

Before they could knock on the door, Alana opened it and ushered them in. "Hi," I couldn't wait for you to get here. Louise?"

A woman in flowing black pants showed up, followed by a man.

"I'd like you to meet Louise and Burt Beeman," Alana said, and she introduced Nick and his family. She didn't call them Mom and Dad.

Mr. Beeman was a tall thin man with a shiny forehead. He shook Dad's hand. "Escaped from the corporate world, too, did you?"

"Oh, yes," Dad said. "And so far I can't say I miss it."

Nick looked around the dome, similar but different from theirs. Chrome, glass, and concrete, the walls and furniture all curved to fit together without any wasted space, just as in their dome. But bright stripes covered the rounded couch, and potted plants sat on every surface. Colorful paintings without frames hung down from the top of the dome on thin wires. They moved slightly when Nick walked past.

"Do you want to see my apartment?" Alana asked Erika.

Apartment? Wow, Nick thought. He had never heard a teenager's bedroom being called an apartment.

"Gee, your own place." Erika said. "I wish I had my own room."

"Then you should ask for one in your next house," Alana told her. "You should start on a design right away. The guest domes are so small."

They followed Alana through the bar that connected the two domes of the dumbbell. Pale blue lighting gave the impression of being outside on a sunny day. A tree with fanned leaves stood in a square blue pot along one side. Patterns of different-colored blocks formed a checkerboard design along the top.

In Alana's room, a sink and mirror combination grew out of the floor on one side. On the other side, a curved shelf held bubbling tanks of exotic-looking fish. Hanging nearby were clipboards, gloves, a white lab coat and small pieces of equipment.

Alana smiled apologetically. "I'm sort of into marine biology," she said. "I'm trying to figure out why the fish are getting this fungus on their backs. I think it could be from an organism that grows when the water heats up."

Nick must have looked at her blankly.

“If they go extinct, they’ll be gone forever,” Alana added. “That matters.”

“Right,” Nick said.

“Like if the fish go extinct, we could be next,” Erika said.

“Exactly,” Alana answered. “Very good. I could use some help here. Are you interested in doing some work in marine biology?”

“Are you kidding?” Erica looked excited enough to pass out. “Sure I would.”

“Then come on over tomorrow,” Alana said.

Something didn’t make sense. “How can you learn marine biology in a place where there are no schools?”

“That’s how it works,” Alana said. “Tomorrow you should just wander around Venus and see if you learn anything. The basics, like math and spelling, are on the computer. We do have tests every once in a while, but no one knows the scores except you.”

“What if I wanted to be an engineer or something?”

Alana nodded toward a window in her room. “Our neighbor over there, Sergei, he’s a structural engineer. He could teach you. Or Jack Frasier.”

“Come on, they wouldn’t have time.”

“Sure they would. That’s what this place is all about.” She had already said Venus was all about time.

Nick smiled, although he wasn’t sure why. This couldn’t be right. She must have gone to school somewhere. And where had she gotten all the equipment? The Central Dome, of course. The source of everything.

Leaving Erika to play a game on Alana’s computer, the two returned to the main dome. The adults were talking about grass and how Venus hadn’t been able yet to come up with a variety that never had to be mowed. Nick could feel a yawn coming on.

“Hm,” Dad said, “that would be something to work on. Sounds like opportunities for research are practically endless here.”

“You get the idea,” Mrs. Beeman said.

“I bought... I mean, I got some art supplies today,” Mom said, sounding a little embarrassed, “but I’m thinking maybe I should branch

out somehow.”

Mrs. Beeman reached for some grapes that had shown up on the table top. “Were you ever a Big Sister or a camp counselor?”

“Not exactly,” Mom said, “But I’m raising two kids and I studied psychology in college.”

Alana looked at Nick and laughed. “We have one new arrival here who is a *challenge*. I think he’s the one we saw making a break for it at the Radial.”

“Tell them about it, Alana,” Mr. Beeman said.

“Well, it’s like the state decided they needed to send us some of the kids from the juvenile detention center in Orlando. Rachel Mathews said the first one arrived yesterday—with an attitude.”

Nick perked up. Juvenile Detention? Paul-the-Neanderthal had been in a place like that twice, not that it ever did him any good.

Mr. Beeman said, “Jack Fraiser thinks anything is possible, but I don’t know about this kid.”

“What’s his name?” Nick asked. It could only be one person, and Alana seemed to think so too.

He waited for her to say the name Peyton, but instead she said, “It’s Tony something, I think.”

“Tony.” Nick ran the name around his brain. “It’s gotta be Peyton. Could it be Tony for short?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“The kid would have been in your orientation,” Mr. Beeman said. “Did you see him?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Nick said. “What’d he do?”

Mr. Beeman reached for a handful of grapes. “I really don’t know. They call him ‘At Risk’, so it could be anything.”

“You wait, Jack Frasier will turn him around,” Alana commented.

Then the talk drifted back to the city and how things worked. Mrs. Beeman said that slot on the far side of the shower capsule was actually a clothes chute, and that you could get your clothes cleaned in about ten minutes, by the time you got out of the shower.

But Nick couldn’t stop thinking about Peyton—Tony. What would happen if he went back to the gate where he had come in? Could he just walk away? And if he could, then what was stopping him from escaping? No one else seemed to give him a second thought.

On the way home, Mom said, “Louise Beeman is nice. I think she’ll be a great neighbor.”

Erika skipped ahead of them with her Teleguide light swinging on her arm. “Alana has her own refrigerator and a table where she can order food. And all those fish. I’ll bet she knows everything there is to know about fish. I think...” Her voice trailed off.

“Don’t get too far ahead,” Mom said. Dad caught up with her.

Splash! Another alligator dove into the pond near the footbridge. By the time Nick shined his light over the edge, all he could see were a few ripples.

“Stay together,” Dad said, and everyone walked silently the rest of the way. They were so close together that their feet almost got tangled. Nick could imagine his mother’s mouth set tight and her eyebrows arched.

He was with her on this one; alligators gave him the creeps too, trained or not. It was the only thing wrong with Venus, as far as he was concerned. Alligators and a kid named Peyton.

Everyone seemed relieved when they reached the door of Dome 84 and it opened for them. It took Nick a few minutes, but he finally settled in to checking the Internet for more information about how Venus worked. He clicked on School and found the gatherings Rachel Mathews had talked about. Students could join in whenever they wanted. Some gatherings were in domes, but most were outside somewhere.

With another click, Nick found out that every morning at 9:30 there were gatherings at construction sites, depending on where the machines were working. He already knew the answer to that: Gamma Ring, Quadrant Seven. Nick could hardly wait for his chance to head back to the cars and to his first *gathering*.

The next morning started out sunny again—he was beginning to see that weather wasn’t the big issue it had been back in Skagit, where it rained two days out of every three. He was on the verge of racing in to ask his dad if he wanted to go with him, when he had a better idea. He would do this alone. Why not? He knew how to get down the path to the Radial and then to the parking area. He knew how to operate a PM and where to get off.

Well, okay, maybe *he* didn’t know those things, but the cars did. That’s all he needed. He even knew how to get lunch if he wasn’t home in time. With a huge sigh of satisfaction, Nick made his plans.

Mom unfolded the easel she’d gotten and carried it out to the grassy area in front of their dome. She arranged her paints on top of a stump and squeezed out blobs onto a plate from the kitchen. She seemed completely absorbed in what she was doing, hardly looking up when Nick walked past.

His father sat down in one of the porch chairs and announced that he was going to *rest*. They had just gotten out of bed a few hours ago, so Nick wasn’t sure why he was already resting; maybe because he’d never been able to do that before. Dad arranged his hands over his abdomen and looked up at the few clouds. Then he moved his chair slightly and sat down again. Birds sang away in the trees and flitted from one branch to another.

Nick eyed his father. He'd said he was going to do research into new kinds of grass, but it wasn't clear when he was going to start work. Maybe he should at least invite him to go out to Quadrant Seven. In the past, his father had not been around much, so including him in anything Nick was doing had never been an issue. Finally, Dad opened one eye and said, "So what're you going to do, huh Nick?"

"Oh, not much," Nick said. "I thought I'd just nose around a little. You know."

"Why don't you go back to that construction site, see how much they got done?"

"Yeah, that's a good idea." Nick felt guilty for his thoughts. "Don't worry, I'll check in." He hesitated for a moment, expecting someone to stop him.

Finally Mom looked up with a brush in her hand and said, "If you get lost—"

"He's not going to get lost," Dad assured her. "Just watch out for alligators."

On his way across the footbridge, Nick passed Romi, one of Alana's friends he'd met the night before. "Do you think Erika could go with me out to Theta Ring?" she asked. "We could get some bikes and ride all the way around."

"Probably," Nick said. "You could ask her. We're in 84." He kept going, feeling good inside, maybe even great. It looked like everyone would be busy except Dad, who wanted it that way.

Walking to the car park, Nick decided that Venus looked different somehow now that he was on his own. The trees seemed to be in sharper focus with their spikes of fronds or leaves draping almost to the ground, while underneath, ferns and flowering shrubs grew everywhere. Birds with long tails or white spots on their wings dotted the sky. A small lizard, almost the exact color of the rock where it was sitting, tilted its tiny head as if to say hello.

Even at fourteen, Nick had almost never gone anywhere alone. Around the block, that was about it. His mother drove to the movie rental store. He took a crowded bus to the Skagit Six movie theatres.

Sometimes he took his skateboard up to the school, but Hank was usually with him.

Being over protected, he felt like he'd suffered for it all his life. It was always just under the surface, how he wasn't exactly what anyone would call brave. He didn't like to fly in window seats, alligators gave him the creeps, and he was afraid of things he might not be able to do well—like drive cars without steering wheels.

But Venus was a different world, and Nick decided that he wanted to be different too. Maybe this was the place where he could be a new person.

Finally, Nick was standing at the car park looking down the row for his favorite car. There it was, or one just like it. He loved the sleek look of the glossy white paint with the black stripe. The colored cars looked almost like toys, he'd decided. White was definitely best.

Nick was about to get in when a voice called, "Hey!"

He twirled around, thinking he had done something wrong, and there was Peyton in the same sloppy shirt and shorts loaded down with things in a half dozen pockets.

"Who, me?" Nick asked, even though he knew.

"Where you goin'?"

Nick eyed him, but didn't answer.

"I'll go with you."

Just like that, as if it didn't matter whether Nick wanted him along or not. He hoped Peyton couldn't see him sigh. How could he explain that he wanted to be alone? That he'd never been alone really and this was his turn. A kid like Peyton had probably been alone plenty of times. Then guilt made him reconsider. "Do they call you Tony?"

"Yeah, you heard of me?" A quick smile pulled at the corner of Peyton's mouth.

"Sort of," Nick hedged. "I heard your mom call you Peyton, so I thought that could be Tony."

"That's me. Tony Tralco. You're Nick Hammond. I saw the list; we're the only fourteens."

"Oh," Nick answered. Just great! Alana had said there weren't

many kids here yet. "I thought I'd go over to this construction site. It's pretty cool."

Tony shrugged. "Okay." His pockets rattled as he approached, smiling as if he were grateful for the chance to have some company.

Nick opened the bubble top on the white car. "I'll drive."

Tony looked down, seemed to notice there wasn't a steering wheel and laughed. "We can take turns."

The top closed them inside with no room to spare on Tony's side. Then Nick spoke his name and their destination. The car moved out and quickly increased its speed. So far, so good. Tony was actually being pretty nice, like he was glad to be along.

When they arrived at the construction site, Nick looked up through the bubble top. He shouldn't have been surprised, but he was. Not one, but two completed apartment complexes stood side by side behind the fence. Each one reached a dozen stories and was capped with a larger section that was probably some kind of penthouse. All of the apartments had decks and tall windows.

"Wow, they must have been building all night," Nick said. "We were just here yesterday and they hadn't even started that second one."

Tony worked himself out of the car and stood watching with a sneer on his face. "Cripes! They must be planning to move the whole nation in here."

Nick ignored his tone. "They go up pretty fast. I'd like to see inside one."

"Not me. I'll be living in one of these boxes soon enough."

"You're not staying in the domes?" *Maybe At Risk* kids were assigned.

"Not after next month. My mother decided."

Nick could ask why, but decided not to be rude. "Well, you'll be a lot closer to the Central Dome," he offered. "That could be good."

"I guess," Tony grumbled and turned away.

Nick looked around for the gathering, spotted a group of people off to the left sitting under a tree. They weren't just kids, though, so he wasn't sure this was it. He counted three or four high school kids, a

couple of younger ones and maybe a dozen adults. A man in jeans leaned against the tree and seemed to be the one in charge.

“I was actually planning to join a class,” Nick said. “That might be it over there. I suppose you’ve heard there are no schools here.”

“Yeah, I heard. It doesn’t make any difference, though. They still find ways to cram your head full of stuff you don’t want to know.”

“Not my head,” Nick answered. He watched the machines for several minutes—the white bar growing outward, the section being cut off, and the section being installed on a column. He turned back to Tony, thought for a few seconds, then asked. “What do you have against Venus? It seems like a pretty nice place to me.”

“Sure,” Tony said with another sneer. “For now. But it’s just an experiment. Didn’t you hear that part?”

“So what?” Nick edged away. He’d come here to join the gathering, and that was what he was going to do. “I’m joining the class. Hey, look, you can take the car and go anywhere you want. Just touch or say the place and it’ll take you there.”

“I know how to work the stupid cars,” Tony countered.

Without looking back, Nick walked away. He’d given Tony a chance but he hadn’t taken it. Too bad. He approached the group and stood watching for a minute before the man by the tree glanced up.

“Hi, pull up some lawn.”

It was the same guy Nick had seen reading at the nutrition center. “Thanks. Is this the construction gathering?” He did not recognize anyone in the group.

“This is it.” The man was in his mid-thirties, thin and tan. He watched Nick sit down on the grass and went on talking. “So the machine inserts pre-fabricated housing components into the support structure you see there. The units are made of carbon fiber-reinforced concrete. The outer shells serve as photovoltaic generators. Does anyone know what that does?”

A boy answered, “To keep you cool or warm?”

“Exactly. You won’t need a furnace or air conditioner.”

“Are the domes made the same way?” a man asked.

“All of Venus is made that way. But we might find a better system in the future.”

“Hey, Gary, has anyone thought about zero point energy?” The one asking was a girl of about seventeen. Nick had no idea what she was talking about.

A woman got up and left. The teacher paid no attention to her.

“Right now we’re concentrating on wind power. We have nearly eighty windmills outside Venus. Did anyone see them?”

“I did,” Nick said, surprising himself for speaking up. “I wondered about them. Do they really work?”

The teacher laughed. “Not as well as we’d like, but we’re working on it. If you want to get involved I can tell you who to go see.”

“Yeah?” Wind power. Nick had never thought about it much, but he liked the streamlined look of the windmills out there among the orange trees. It didn’t seem to matter that Nick was just a kid and he wondered about this. *They let kids work here?* he had asked Alana, and she said she did it for the fun of it. What if he could work on windmills or in construction? That would be fun. What else might he do?

Nick stayed for nearly an hour, until his legs felt bent permanently. He got up and nodded at Gary—he felt he should do something—and left, mostly to see if he really could leave any time he wanted. No one even looked up.

When he got back to the cars, a third apartment building had been started and Tony was still watching, yanking on the chain-link fence and scuffing his toe into the bottom row of links. Nick stopped. Tony hadn’t even been interested in the apartments, so why was he still there? Why was he messing up the fence?

“You bailing out already?” Tony asked, turning around.

“I stayed long enough. I’ll go back tomorrow.”

“Count me out.”

“Sure, whatever.” Then Nick made an instant decision, maybe because he felt buoyed by having just attended a class without feeling like he was going to melt down. Or maybe it was the pathetic way Tony

looked right now, all by himself.

“Hey, we could go to the Central Dome for lunch” he said. “Everything’s free.” Tony had probably already figured that out.

Tony shrugged. “I gotta eat somewhere.”

They walked back to the cars with Tony lagging behind. Several times Nick looked back to see if he was still coming. Tony picked a black PM, and they both climbed in with Nick on the passenger side this time.

Tony said, “There are places to eat all over Venus” as if he’d spent all day yesterday checking them all out.

“Okay, we could just park somewhere and start walking.” Nick noticed that Tony was not wearing a Teleguide; part of his protest probably.

“Delta-three.” Tony spoke to the dashboard, then smiled, his round cheeks bulging.

Nick forced a smile back and settled in to the seat. The only fourteens. If he wanted a friend his age, it was going to be slim pickings.

When they got to the station, they noticed that there were not just a few cars, but dozens. And to their left, spread out like green mold, a sort of grass heli-pad was a parking lot for several of the UFO-like helicopters Alana had pointed out. Not only that, there were two larger craft that looked a little like metal blimps. White with black windows top and bottom, they sat on four fat pods. It was hard to tell which part of the craft was the front and which the back.

“T-VTOL,” Nick said. “I wonder what that means.” The letters were printed on the sides of both of the odd machines. “Oh, Vertical Take Off and Landing. I read about that.”

“What’s wrong with plain ol’ airplanes?” Tony grumbled. “It’s probably a black budget project.”

“Black what?”

“Just something the government is hiding from us.”

“No, it’s not,” Nick said. “The Army already has these. Maybe not exactly, but similar. They’re probably a Frasier design.”

“Not a chance,” Tony said, not that he’d know.

Back in Skagit, The Neanderthal couldn’t figure out the easiest math problems. Tony was probably just like him if you knew the truth. Trying to be a big deal, but pathetic when you got down to it.

They headed down the path to the right of the PM station. “The eating places all have blue flags,” Nick told him, determined not to get into it with Tony.

“I know that.”

Trees with every description of foliage lined the path—wide leaves, lacy leaves, pine needles, palm fronds. Flowers, bushes, even cactus filled the spaces in between. They passed several kids on bikes and a few joggers. A woman sat on a bench typing on a small laptop.

A group of four people appeared to be at a gathering, sitting on the lawn facing an old man who must have been the instructor. Behind them were a half dozen tennis courts and at least two putting greens for golf, though no one was playing.

Up ahead Nick noticed several blue flags in a cluster. He pointed.

“Food,” Tony said, and started running. He gallumped along while Nick sprinted easily ahead of him. When they got to the flags they found three nutrition centers, all of them in variations on the dome design.

“I guess it doesn’t matter,” Nick said, “you pick.”

“Let’s eat outside. I can’t stand being trapped inside those igloos.”

Nick followed Tony to one of the domes where fountains bubbled up between some outdoor tables. Only three of about twenty tables were occupied, and Nick wondered about this. Why so many eating places for so few people?

Tony didn’t say another word until he had inhaled his entire meal of two hoagie sandwiches, pudding and French fries—healthy versions probably. He broke off a piece of his plate and popped it into his mouth, then leaned close to Nick and said, “Look at those idiots. Can you believe it? Everyone thinking they’re having a great time.”

“So, maybe they are,” Nick answered.

“My dad says this is nothing but a Utopian scam.” Tony leaned back in his chair, popped another piece of his plate into his mouth, and

looked at Nick as if he were challenging him.

“How can it be a scam?” Nick asked. “No one’s making any money. Jack Frasier says all cities are gonna be like this some day.”

“No, they’re *not*.” Tony fixed a look of disgust on his face. “No money, no stock market?”

“Well...”

“My dad’s not selling his NASDAQ. He says it’s going to top out a seven thousand this time. Not bad when you consider he bought it at twelve hundred. We’ll be rich.”

Nick knew a little about the stock market—they’d done a project at school—but it sounded like Tony knew more. It didn’t matter; Nick liked Venus, and he didn’t have to listen to this. “So, if this is such a scam, why’d he bring you here? Where is he, anyway? I haven’t even seen him.”

“They’re getting divorced. It’s really stupid.”

“Oh,” Nick said.

“She got custody. They didn’t even ask me.”

Nick watched Tony’s face for a moment. Suddenly he felt sorry for him, and he wanted to know what had happened before Venus. “I heard the detention center sent a kid over here.”

Tony didn’t react at first, then he said, “So?”

“Nothing. I was just wondering if it was you.”

Tony’s expression kept sliding around from a frown to a laugh, and finally a sneer, like he was proud of himself. “Pretty wild, huh? They think I need fresh air and milk.”

Nick eyed him. He doubted if it had anything to do with health. It had to be punishment for something. “So, what’d you do?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The two stared at each other, then Tony shrugged. “I took off a couple of times, that’s all.” He adjusted his shoulders and let out a snicker. “I made it all the way from Pensacola to Montana last summer.”

“You went all that way alone?” Clearly, Nick was supposed to be impressed, and maybe he was a little. He would be too scared to do something like that, even if he had wanted to. “Why don’t you just call your dad; see if he’ll come and get you?”

“I already called him,” Tony answered. “He says I’m better off here. What he means is he doesn’t want to pay child support. It might be a scam, but this place is free.”

Maybe Tony *was* better off, Nick thought. At least Jack Frasier would think so. They finished eating and made their way back up the path toward the cars, Tony breathing hard even though the ground was perfectly flat.

“Anyway... it doesn’t matter.” Tony stopped and turned to Nick, grinning like a smiley face. “I have a better plan.”

“Like what?” Nick asked. He’d had been humoring him for the past half hour. Being nice, being positive. But Tony made it hard. Nick noticed a bench under a tree, and he sat down. Tony plunked down beside him, breathing heavy, sweating.

“I want out of here,” he puffed, “and the best way to do it is to shut this place down?”

“Like get a lawyer?”

“No, no, not that.” Tony pulled one side of his lip into a sneer. “You figure I got money for an attorney?” Sweat trickled down his temples. “You been underground yet?”

They’d been here less than two days; how had Tony had time to check out the bowels of Venus? “Not yet,” he answered. “I hear it looks like a shopping mall.”

“Sort of.” Tony stood up, wiped his forehead with the side of his arm, and flashed another grin. “C’mon. I’ll show you.”

Something told Nick this was not about having fun. “I’ve been gone all morning.”

“So what? You have to check in with your *mother*?” Tony lifted his hands in a gesture of disbelief.

Nick wasn’t about to explain. He turned away and spoke into his Teleguide.

Without so much as a ring, Nick’s mother was suddenly talking to him, her voice sounding as if it were right there on his wrist.

“Oh, Nick, there you are. Having a good time, Sweetie?”

“Yeah, sure,” Nick said uncertainly. “Tell Dad I went to that class this morning and found out all about the apartments they’re building. And, by the way, I met up with that kid, the one who was at orientation.”

Before Nick could say anything more, his mother said, “Oh... okay. You be careful, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, okay. We thought we’d go over to the Central Dome,” he heard himself say. “We’ve already had lunch.”

When she said that would be fine, just be home in time for dinner,” Nick turned to Tony. “All clear,” he said. “But I’ve got a lot to do today. I can’t be gone long.”

He sprinted the rest of the way with Tony breathing hard behind him. It was his way of letting Tony know that he wasn’t necessarily the one in charge.

This time they picked a gold car. It no longer mattered who sat where—without a steering wheel, what difference did it make? The car sped along, taking their stomachs up and over several other cars, around corners and onto a straight-away to the Central Dome. It scooted neatly in at the same station where Nick had been the day before.

Inside the CD, Nick stopped once again to marvel at the holographic earth.

“Keep movin’,” Tony said with a shove to Nick’s arm. “There’s no one at the elevator.”

Nick jerked away. “It’s called a Transveyor, and there’s hardly ever anyone there.” He followed Tony to the open double doors.

A moment later they were dropping slowly into the depths below Venus. It took much longer than rising to the third floor and Nick looked up at the smooth ceiling wondering how far down they were really going.

Tony wore an excited smile on his face while Nick imagined walls of wet rock sliding past just inches from where they were standing. He was glad when the Transveyor stopped and the doors opened again. Cool, dry air flowed all around them.

“I like it down here.” Tony hiked up his shorts with all the loaded pockets, and led the way. He cast his eyes first to the left, then to the right as he walked down a long hallway.

On each side were metal-lined rooms, some as big as department stores. A brightness, like sunlight, permeated every space. It did look a little like a shopping mall, but this one was deserted. They seemed to be the only two down here, and now Nick could see why. The “shops” were crammed with uninteresting things like pipes, wires, hoses and computer screens of blue or green.

“So, I wonder where they do the laundry,” Nick said. “Where’s the garbage?” Everything was enclosed in dull gray boxes or behind doors of varying sizes. On the computer screens, colored bar graphs constantly grew larger or smaller.

“What did you want to show me?” Nick asked. “Doesn’t look like there’s much to see.”

“That’s a matter of opinion. Check this out.” Tony moved farther down the hall. “Look down there,” he said, pointing. “That’s where all the electrical stuff is controlled.”

All Nick saw was a glass gate about three feet high and beyond that a second hallway that looked like an enormous square tube. A bend at about twenty feet prevented seeing any further.

“Come on.” Tony moved in that direction, lumbering along like an awkward bear.

Nick stood watching him for a moment, then followed him to the gate. He was relieved when a woman’s voice said, “Identification. Please speak your name.” No scanners? Maybe they hadn’t gone far enough to be recognized by scanners.

Tony put his finger to his lips, telling Nick not to say anything. Then he motioned him back down the hallway.

When they were once again in front of the Transveyor, Nick said, "What was the point of that?"

"Obviously, that's where all the important stuff is," Tony said, "and that's where I want to go."

"I wouldn't try it," Nick said. What he really wanted to say was that Venus was *his* place now, and he'd take it personally if anyone tried to damage anything. But he didn't want Tony to know he cared. Like when Paul-the-Neanderthal back home found out he was afraid of snakes, he must have searched for an especially disgusting black one.

Tony laughed. "They don't have an army, they don't have police, they don't even have crime. So I'm betting they wouldn't know what to do. They might even *expel* me. That could be okay."

"You're nuts," Nick said. "All you're gonna get is a lecture from Jack Frasier. You could end up back in Juvenile Detention."

"So? I was only supposed to do six months."

"Whatever, Tony," Nick answered. "I like it here. If you hate this place so much why don't you just leave? There's an entrance out there, you know, and there aren't even any guards."

"I don't know, maybe I will," he said. Then suddenly, "Hey, do you wanna go to my place and feed my rats?"

"Not especially," Nick said. "Look, I gotta get back."

"I'm not ready to leave yet," Tony said.

"Okay, don't. I'll see you." Without looking back, Nick walked not too slow, and not too fast, to the Transveyor where he waited only a moment for the doors to open.

"Main Floor," Nick said to the walls inside the Transveyor. Smoothly it moved upward, but before the doors opened, Nick changed his mind. "Orientation" he said. Maybe Jack Fraiser was up there again.

The doors opened briefly on the main floor where the huge blue globe filled the rectangle of Nick's view, then closed and continued on. Nick got off and went to the auditorium door. Opening it a crack, he saw Frasier sitting on his stool as if he'd been waiting for him. Nick waved

and stepped through the doorway.

“Hello,” Mr. Frasier said. “It’s good to see you again.” He spoke softly and smiled in his usual friendly way. “What can I do for you?”

“Well...” Nick didn’t need help exactly; he had really just wanted to talk to the man. He wanted to make sure he still felt good about being in Venus, the way he had the first day they’d arrived. “You said someday all cities would be like this one. When do you think that will happen?”

“‘When’ is a relative term,” Frasier said. He turned on his stool and looked right into Nick’s eyes. It seemed, again, that he was reading from a script. “Life is no longer sustainable the way we’ve been living. We are running out of natural resources and people are working, not for the betterment of our planet, but to make money. When people do not need money, their efforts can be used in better ways.”

“Not everyone likes it here,” Nick said and waited for an answer.

Mr. Frasier’s face worked as he talked, as if he’d given the same answers many times. “People are free to suggest changes.” He paused, took a deep breath and tilted his head. “Where do you live in Venus, Nick?”

Nick sat down on the cushy step and waited for it to adjust to him. “In one of the domes,” he said. “Number eighty-four.”

“Oh, yes, Rachel and I built that one ourselves. I hope you like turquoise. I’m afraid it’s her favorite color.”

Nick laughed. “We like it fine. Hey, I was wondering about all those apartment buildings over in Gamma-Seven. It looks like a lot of people are going to be moving in.”

Mr. Frasier swiveled on his stool and pointed to a graph that had magically shown up on the side wall. “To make Venus really work we need about 30,000 people living here. The apartments will be ready for occupancy very soon.”

“It doesn’t seem like there are many people here,” Nick said. “Where will they all come from?”

“People are beginning to realize that their culture is not sustainable.”

Why did Frasier keep saying that? “I know,” Nick persisted, “but giving up money... It’s a little weird... you know what I mean.”

Then Mr. Frasier stood up and moved behind his stool. For a moment, Nick thought he was dismissing him, but he went right on talking. “If all the money in the world were destroyed, as long as topsoil, factories, and other resources were left intact, we could build anything we choose to build and fulfill any human need. It is not money that people need, but rather the things that money buys.”

He still hadn’t said where all the new people were going to come from, so Nick asked again. “Who do you think will be moving in here?”

“As more people talk about Venus, others will come. Trust. Trust,” the man said in his soft voice. “In Venus people can finally be free. Tell me, Nick, have you ever wondered why the world produced only one Leonardo da Vinci, one Madam Curie, one Albert Einstein?”

“Well... ,” Nick said.

“There should be thousands of them, millions. And there will be in an education system that works as I envision it. They will come from a culture that allows people to study, not for grades or jobs, but for the pure joy of learning.”

Nick wasn’t so sure about that. What about geniuses? Didn’t some of them come from poor families or countries where the schools weren’t exactly great? Anyway, Miss Nichols, the English teacher, had talked about the *joy of learning*, but the kids just made fun of her. She even got beanbag chairs for one corner of their classroom so kids could read away from their desks. It hadn’t worked though. Paul Hornsby had pulled the stitching out of his and little white beans had spilled out all over the floor.

Mr. Frasier sat down again. “Why wouldn’t people from all over the world want to live in a city like Venus?”

“I don’t know,” Nick said, and he didn’t. It sounded good, but... he wasn’t sure. Nick himself had a special reason for liking Venus, but maybe there weren’t many people like him. He looked up at Frasier, out of questions for now. “I guess that’s all.”

In his kind way, Frasier said, “You may come talk to me any time you want to.”

“Okay, I will,” Nick said, and he knew he would. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Nick took the steps two at a time and let the door ease shut behind him. Then he rode the Transveyor down to the main level and got off.

Scanning the place with its thin crowd of people moving around, Nick did not see Tony or anyone who remotely resembled him. A half dozen people stood at computer terminals circling the base of the great orb. Nick moved closer to see if he could figure out what they were doing.

“Hurricane Norris...” he heard a man saying. “She won’t get this far inland. Rain and wind probably.”

“So much for golf,” his friend said.

Nick saw what they were talking about, a small white swirl the size of a button near a thumb of land—Florida. Another one sat out in the Atlantic Ocean, and streaks of white swished across other parts of the country.

Across the planet, tiny black jetliners progressed to their destinations, while spots of red light flashed in several areas, indicating something—forest fires maybe. Nick moved closer. By the shapes and locations, he could tell which countries he was looking at. A wavy, blue line in the northern part of Japan looked like it could be an earthquake. Nick stood at the base of the holographic globe imagining that he was floating around above it like an astronaut doing a space walk.

After a few minutes, he moved on, smiling to himself. He did not look around for Tony again. Instead he left the Central Dome and made

his way back home without a single mistake. Getting off the Number Four Radial, he felt a sense of pride. Even the part about leaving Tony felt good. And he loved that the mulched path to Domicile 84 already looked familiar with its ponds and the footbridge.

He wasn't sure why he turned his head, but as he passed the path to the Beeman's domicile, he peered through the trees and saw someone sitting at a table. It had to be Alana. He veered off in her direction and found her putting things into little bottles. She looked up.

"Hey, Nick, I was hoping I'd see you."

Nick smiled. "Really? You could have called me on the Teleguide."

Alana capped one of the bottles and lined it up beside the others. "Oh, I didn't want to bother you. Your mom said you'd gone off on your own."

Nick walked across the small clearing. Sitting there with her pale hair hanging loose, Alana almost seemed to glow.

"What're you doing there?" Nick didn't really care, but it was something to say.

She held one of the bottles up to the sunlight. "One of my fish died this morning." A bluish fish floated at the top of some discolored water, its eyes wide open.

"Oh, sorry," Nick said.

Her eyes looked more blank than usual, such a pale blue that she almost seemed blind sometimes. "Louise gave me this one. I'd had her for two years."

Her? Nick wondered how she could tell, but he decided not to ask.

"Can you stay and talk for a while?" Alana asked.

"Well, sure." Nick wondered what time it was and if he should check in again, but this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and he wasn't blowing it by acting like a little kid who had to be home on time.

He pulled out a chair and sat down. "A hurricane's going to hit Florida. I saw it on the globe at the Central Dome."

"Oh, that happens all the time. If it gets close our Teleguides will sound." The fringe of Alana's eyelashes cast dark shadows on her cheeks

and he could now see that she had one dimple just above the edge of her lip. The skin on her neck and arms was just as brown and perfect as her legs.

“Tell me all about the town where you used to live,” Alana said. “I hardly remember anything but Venus.”

“You serious? How come?”

“I don’t know,” Alana said, “I’ve just never left. They say it’s pretty awful out there—guns, drugs, you know... But it doesn’t get hot where you come from, does it?”

Nick scooted the chair closer, making a scratching sound. “Sure it does, and it snows sometimes too.”

“Really? That would be fun.”

Then they talked about Venus, and Alana got an almost religious look on her face. “I feel safe here. It’s like the only place where I think civilization has a chance of surviving. But I’m kind of scared too.”

“You are?” Nick felt his heart lurch protectively. “What are you scared of?”

Alana raised her hands as if what she had to say should be obvious. “Well, we don’t have enough people living here. Eventually, we’re going to need more programmers and inventors, everything. And, we can’t live on donations forever. Venus is supposed to be resource based, but so far a lot of the resources are given to us. Rachel Mathews says that some of the Congressmen want to shut us down.”

Nick thought about Tony and the things he’d said. “Why would they want to do that?” he asked dumbly. He knew the answer.

“I guess they like the money system.”

“Sure, until it all implodes,” Nick said.

“Thousands of apartments are going to be ready pretty soon.” Alana shook her head. “There’s no one to move into them.”

“Jack Frasier said new people are arriving all the time.”

“I don’t know,” Alana answered. “The new people I was supposed to meet yesterday didn’t even show up.”

“Oh.” Nick squirmed uncomfortably. “Frasier says the world can’t go on like this. If everything crashes, plenty of people will show up.”

Just because Frasier had said it didn't make it so, yet Nick's own instincts had told him it was already beginning.

And then there was Tony. He was hoping Venus would fail, as if it could be a ticket to his former life. In his own words, he wanted to shut it down.

Nick sat there looking at Alana and wondering what would happen to a girl like her if Venus disappeared. What would happen to him? How could he go back to Skagit after living in a place like Venus?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In spite of their gloomy conversation, Nick skipped home feeling lighter than he could ever remember. Alana was a friend and she was a girl. She had said she hoped he would walk by so they could talk. That meant she was a girl-friend. A girlfriend. Maybe age didn't matter in Venus. The rules seemed different here in most other ways, so maybe this was different too. And she didn't even seem to notice his freckles, or maybe she didn't mind brown dots on guys' noses—the rugged look.

Mom's easel was in the same place where she'd set it this morning. Except now it held a canvas of blue, green, yellow and purple leaves with blue-streaked oranges. Nick stopped to study the painting. Wow, he thought. Mom's pictures for sod brochures sure didn't look like this. This was real *art*.

She came to the door of the dome. "So, what do you think?"

"Well," Nick said, "it's terrific. I mean, really." He could feel her smile even though he couldn't see her face through the screen.

Dad sat at the computer, half hidden by the book case. Nick was going to just walk past him, but instead he paused next to the Earth globe. "Hi."

"Hey, Nick. How was your day?" Dad looked over his shoulder and smiled.

"Well... okay, actually. I went to the gathering and learned all about those apartments that are going up." He didn't mention Tony. "They're pretty cool. This sort of skin on the outside controls the temperature inside."

They talked for half an hour, something that hadn't happened since Dad's days at the university. Nick logged onto his own computer feeling great.

He felt great the next day too, and the next. In fact, life in Venus settled into its own kind of normalcy where no one thought anything of foods that popped up on tables or cars that anyone, including kids, could

drive. Machines that could build apartment complexes in one day were no big deal. It was just the way it was in Venus.

In this world, Nick's mother painted, stacking up a collection of finished canvases. Dad dozed in the lawn chair, went all over Venus on the Radial with a notebook, or studied things online. He had hinted that he thought there was a way of creating a kind of grass that could put a lot more oxygen into the air.

Erika and Romi rode bikes, but they shopped for clothes only once. After that, just as Dad had predicted, there seemed little point in it when they could have anything they wanted. His sister joined Alana's marine biology gathering, and spent most of her time at the waterway.

Nick went every morning to the construction gathering. He rarely saw Tony, which was okay with him.

When the machines finished in Gamma-Seven, they moved on to the next where they started building the first skyscraper in Venus. A lot of people turned out for the gatherings there. This was going to be something to see. Enormous cranes moved into place and reached down with great arms to construct the story directly below. As the building rose, so did the cranes.

The instructor, Gary again, explained each step as it happened. "This skyscraper will be stabilized against earthquakes and high winds by the three elongated columns you see there. Each are one hundred feet wide and can be as much as a mile high when the structure is finished."

A collective gasp came from the sixty or so people who had shown up.

"Why do you suppose we would want to build such tall buildings?" Gary asked.

"Because they look cool," a boy answered.

"Wrong," Gary said with a laugh. "These super-sized skyscrapers assure that more land will be available for parks and wilderness preserves, while at the same time helping to eliminate urban sprawl. Why are we worried about cities spreading out too much?"

No one answered, probably because the answer was obvious.

"Well," Gary said, "We aren't. Not just yet anyway. The building

you see going up before your eyes is an experiment. And we aren't sure how high it will be. But we want proof that it makes sense here in Venus."

Nick looked over at the structure and counted—so far just eleven stories high. Other machines were busy building domes at the base and fin-like appendages along the sides of the column. Maybe they had something to do with stability in wind. But what would happen if this didn't work? Maybe it wasn't going to be a mile high, but if a building of this size were to topple, it could be a catastrophe.

"Gary?" Nick raised his hand as if he were in a regular school. "What if this thing falls over?"

"It won't," Gary said. "If the structural integrity is compromised in any way, alarms will sound and people will be evacuated. Then the structure will fold in on itself in a very orderly way. It won't fall over."

"What if a plane hits it?"

"Again," Gary said, "we don't think it will—an electromagnetic shield around the building will keep that from happening." Then he added, "But we don't know for sure. That's why Venus is experimental so far."

By the time Nick got home, he was still feeling terrific, fabulous in fact, and he wondered about that. Could he trust it? Nick Hammond's life had never felt this good so many days in a row, but this had been going on almost since he arrived in Venus. Something had to be wrong, something he had failed to notice.

The door to Dome 84 recognized him and opened.

"Don't bother Dad," Erika said, startling him. "He's mad." She was sprawled on the curved couch, reading an electronic book.

Was he psychic? Nick eyed his father as he slipped through the rounded room. He was sitting at the computer desk in front of a blank screen, talking to the invisible telephone.

"How do you know?" he mouthed to Erika.

She shrugged as if to say, *I just know.*

Well it wasn't Nick's problem, and he wasn't going to let it spoil

his mood. Back home in Skagit everyone tiptoed around when Gil Hammond was mad about something. But this was Venus and his father was a new man. Nick had already decided that he wasn't going to tiptoe anymore, though he could see by the way his father's hands were moving up and down that Erika was right.

Nick went on into their bedroom and sat down heavily at the computer on his side of the room. He logged on and clicked Mail. He had four messages. Four! All of them from Hank.

Where the heck are you, bud? Krazy Koster keeps asking me about you. What's the deal, dude?

Nick smiled. Ol' Hank. Obviously, their messages had passed out there in cyberspace. Too bad they couldn't text any more.

Then, Venus, as in second blob from the sun? Must be hot there. Any cool babes? What's the deal about no school? If I were you, dude, I'd study under the covers at night. Cuz, you're gonna be just a wee bit behind, as in your behind is gonna smoke if you blow off the whole rest of the year.

Message three: *Hey, you out there? Give me a rattle, 'kay?*

Message four: *Okay, I give. This is positively my last holler. So log on, stupid, and give me a clue.*

Nick laughed out loud. He did miss Hank, a little anyway. Maybe he was a pretty good friend after all. He'd have to be to write four e-mails. Nick clicked Reply and copied Hanks tone by typing, *One cool babe, but I'm not telling cuz you'll fly down here and take her. Not that she'd want a scuz like you.* He smiled to himself. He skipped the part about Alana being an older woman.

Today I went to non-school. It was pretty cool. Last week, I watched an apartment building go up in one day. I'll be back someday, maybe when you're off in college. Your used-to-be friend, Nick.

He re-read the message, then deleted "used-to-be" and left *Your friend, Nick*

"Nick!" Dad bellowed from the other room.

Like the old days. Nick jumped the way he always did to when his father used that tone of voice. How had he sensed that something was

going to go wrong? Moving slowly on purpose, he went into the other room where Erika sat up now all wide-eyed. Mom had just come in from somewhere, too, with a look on her face that said, *What in the world is wrong with you?*

“Look,” Dad said, rubbing his neck. “Look, I’m sorry I yelled, but we’ve got a little crisis, and we need to discuss it... as a family.”

“Gil, just say it. You’re scaring the kids.”

“They’re not scared.”

Yes, we are, Nick thought. At least Erika was.

“Someone got into the Pinewood house,” Dad spit out. “Before the storage company could get over there. The alarm went off but the police assumed it was an accident. They got the computers, my microscope, both TVs, everything that’s worth anything.”

Mom put her hand over her mouth. “Not the artwork!” She had a couple of paintings done by famous artists. One was a picture of a fisherman that had hung in the entryway forever.

Nick was wondering about all his own stuff. They probably wouldn’t take games or beat-up skateboards. “My computer too?”

“I don’t have a complete list yet,” Dad said. “But I’m going to have to fly back to Seattle to settle all this. Maybe we should sell the house and be done with it.” He sat down on the curved couch and dropped his head into his hands. “Maybe this was all a mistake.”

The whole dome seemed to gasp.

Mom started to speak twice before she actually said anything. “No, Gil, it wasn’t a mistake.” She went to stand next to him and put her hand on his neck. “We can’t undo our lives *again*. Come on... we haven’t even been here for a month yet. I just started a new painting, one I’ve always wanted to do, you know what I mean? I like it here.”

She sat down again. “How do you like that? I didn’t think I would, but I like this place, it grows on you. Anyway, if we sell the house, we’ll have no place to go when the year is up.”

The year. Nick realized he was counting on staying here forever.

“Well, that’s not strictly true,” Dad said. “I could put the money in an investment.”

Nick could tell his father already had one foot out of Venus. His heart began to pound with the pain of it. If he were 21, or even 18, he could make his own decision. But he was still considered a kid, and kids didn't get to vote, not really.

"How can I wear my body suit in Skagit?" Erika complained. "The girls will think I'm from outer space. And I'll have to pay for all my clothes again."

Dad glanced at her without answering. "Nick?" He seemed to be saying, *We're buddies now. Help me decide.*

Nick tried to speak but he couldn't. Inside he smiled at Hank's goofy emails; it would be fun to see him again, but... Things were different now. He couldn't leave Alana. He liked Jack Frasier and he liked that Venus could build an apartment complex in one day.

"Selling sounds a little extreme," Mom said, breaking the mood. "I say we rent the house out like we first planned."

Then Dad said, "Well, whoever it was did some damage too. We have to do some repairs now before we can even rent it. Come on, Nick, what do you think?"

He was going to have to answer. He had asked Nick's opinion when they first arrived, too, except this time it was coming from the old Gil Hammond, the one who saw himself as a business man.

"Well, I think we don't want to leave here right now. Not after you brought us here and we heard what Jack Frasier had to say. I feel like we're doing something important here, not like back home where nothing made any difference."

"Okay, okay" Dad said, sounding annoyed. Or maybe he was just worried. "Then I'll make the trip back to Skagit, see what I can work out that makes sense. What I'm hearing is that you want to make this Venus Project work?"

"Yess!" Erika said positively. "The betta layed her eggs this morning." The betta was her new, black fish with fancy fins.

"I'm definitely staying," Nick blurted out.

His dad frowned and stood up. He looked so lonely that Nick moved a step closer to him, about to put his arms around him. Why he

didn't follow through, he wasn't sure. Hugging his father was just not something he did anymore, not in the last few years at least.

Quickly, Mom said, "I could go with you, Gil? Someone could take the kids for a few days."

"I'm not sure how long this is going to take," Dad said, "I'd better go by myself."

Nick's chest ached. There was no 'right thing' to do. Stay or go. The rest of the evening, while Dad got ready to leave the next day, he sat on the rounded couch in their dome trying not to think about their Pinewood house, but the pictures in his head would not go away. They had lived there for a long time. Smokey, their cat, was even buried in the garden out back.

Someone had broken in, maybe kicked in the door or something, and the police had not even bothered to come. Then the vandals had probably run right through the living room and up the stairs, laughing all the way because the Hammonds had tons of things that could be sold.

Come to think of it, their Camry had been in the garage. Had they gotten that too? He wondered what they had thought when they got to his room. It was probably so messy that they couldn't find anything anyway. He tried to laugh, but this wasn't funny.

Jack Frasier had said that things and money didn't matter when you had enough. But these were *their* things. Maybe they couldn't stay here after all. Like Mom had said, this wasn't the real world. The real world could be dark and ugly, but maybe they weren't cut out to live on another planet.

He wandered back into his room where another email came through from Hank. *Hey, heard about your house. This really sucks. E-body knew you had split, even the crooks, looks like. I'll keep an eye out. Hankster.* Good ol' Hank; too bad it was too late.

The next morning, the whole family made their way back to the entrance to Venus, the same way they had come in. They passed the concrete hut where they had first seen Alana, the rounded door closed now.

Dad wore his dark slacks and a pale blue shirt with a yellow tie. Just outside the entrance a long black car idled in the gravel turnaround. John Daniels again. He was just closing the trunk, and seemed startled when the Hammonds showed up. For some reason, the sight of Daniels made Nick's heart drop like a Transveyor. It was really depressing being in exactly the same place where they had started, as if they'd made no progress at all.

Daniels snorted. "Oh, hello, sir."

"I'll be going to the airport in Orlando. Can you get me there for a noon flight?"

"Did you order a car, Sir? I'm—"

"Oh," Dad said. "I assumed you'd been sent to pick me up."

"That would have been a van, sir, but no problem," Daniels said, quickly reaching for Dad's bag. "I can get you there in plenty of time. I'll call it in. No point two drivers making the run."

"Fair enough," Dad said, and he turned to give Erika a hug, then patted Nick on the shoulder. He gave Mom a kiss, and that was it.

He looked almost happy, Nick thought, as if he were being forced to do something he secretly wanted to do anyway. He got into the car and pulled the door shut.

Nick's throat tightened watching the limo disappear into the orange groves. And he felt guilty. He always felt guilty. Erika sniffed.

Mom sighed. "Why do I think this is a bad omen?"

"What kind of bad omen?" Nick asked, even though his stomach was beginning to feel tight.

"I don't know exactly," Mom said. "It's just that I know you can't step in and out of lives. It's not like taking a sweater off and putting it back on again, know what I mean?"

Nick did know. Maybe his father had gotten bored with all that free time. "But he was the one who wanted to come here so much," he argued. "He said he was happy. I just don't get it."

"I know," Mom said. Her words sounded slow and defeated. "Come on, we may as well go back to the dome. I have a painting I want to finish while I still can."

Going back through the entrance, the female voice said, “You have just stepped into the future.”

Sadness overtook Nick. His dad had shown them Venus, tricked them into coming, really. Was Mom sensing that once Dad left Venus the spell would be broken and he wouldn’t come back again? Or worse, that they’d have to leave too?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nick, Erika and their mother lined up at the bar for dinner. Mom said she didn't want to eat at the menu table with Dad's empty chair staring at her, so they ordered their meals as usual, then carried their edible plates to the bar.

As if in reaction to everyone's mood, three Teleguides all sounded at the same time. *Storm Warning. Possibility of high winds.* Two hours later, at about 8 p.m., the rain came, just as the holographic globe had shown. Vines scraped across the eyeball windows and across the skylight. Water pelted the dome, sounding like someone had turned on the shower.

Dad called from Skagit, saying he'd had a bumpy flight and that he missed them, which left Mom crying. Maybe she had cried back at their Pinewood house sometimes too, but Nick never knew about it. Now, living in a dome, there was no way to hide the fact.

The next morning the rain had passed and Nick headed for the CD to see Jack Frasier. He wasn't sure what he'd say, but he needed to talk to someone. All the way to the Central Dome, he fought the feeling that wanted to bubble up. If he felt this bad about his father leaving for a few days, what did it mean?

"So your father has left the city." Jack Frasier sat on his stool as usual with his hands folded in his lap. In his kindly voice, he asked, "Do you miss him, Nick?"

"He said he'd be back as soon as he gets our house repaired. Someone broke in and vandalized the place." Now that he was here with Frasier, Nick realized what it was he feared—that everything was going to change again because of a world out there that was all too real.

"I'm sorry to hear that," the man said kindly. Although Frasier was wearing his hat, his face was not in shadow, and Nick could see the concern in his eyes. "Do you have a question for me today?"

"Well..." What he really wanted was to keep living in Venus. Dad said he was coming back, so maybe he would. Maybe what Nick needed

to do was turn his attention to Venus itself, and that made him think about vandals. And Tony.

Tony had probably just been bragging when he said he was going to shut down Venus, but then again, maybe he had some kind of a plan.

“What if someone broke the law here?” Nick asked.

Without blinking Frasier said, “There are no laws here.”

Just what Tony had said. It sounded ridiculous.

“That’s an unusual concept, isn’t it, Nick?”

“Well...” Maybe Venus was too new to have laws, but there would have to be rules eventually, wouldn’t there?

“Most of our actions are determined by the circumstances that surround us,” Frasier said. “Some people steal in order to have something they believe they need. Violence is actually the result of fear.” Frasier’s blue eyes pierced Nick’s, as if he were trying to read his mind. He waited.

“What about people who are just plain bad?” Nick said, filling the silence.

Frasier had an answer for that too. “No new baby is bad. And the world already has thousands of laws aimed at controlling bad people.” His hands made a large gesture to show how laws filled the universe. “If laws worked, we’d be free of crime by now.”

It seemed like Jack Frasier always talked in circles. “I don’t know,” Nick persisted. “The bad guys go to jail; that’s the way it is.” He shrugged. “Maybe the police already caught the ones who broke into our house.”

“We keep building more prisons. If crime continues to increase at the present rate, half of the population will be in prison within the decade, and the other half will have to guard them.”

Nick assumed it was a joke, but Frasier did not smile. What was he suggesting? That vandals should be allowed to vandalize? That didn’t seem right either.

The man planted his hands on his knees and stood up. He walked behind his stool where he adjusted his hat and crossed his arms.

“Nothing changes overnight,” he assured Nick. “It will take a great deal of time to build a society where crime as a behavior is not necessary.” Finally he smiled. “You like to argue, don’t you, Nick?”

Nick grinned. “Well...”

“That’s good.” Frasier sat down again. “When you argue, it shows that you’re thinking. Venus needs thinkers.”

“My mother says I should be a lawyer.”

Nick thought Frasier might smile at that too, but instead he said seriously, “Lawyers will be obsolete one day soon. We will present our cases to machines, programmed to be one hundred percent logical. They will offer solutions based on nothing but the facts.”

Nick didn’t believe lawyers would ever be obsolete, not as long as people sued each other. On the other hand, if there were no money, what could they sue *for*—oranges?

Nick waited, but instead of explaining his remark, Frasier said, “I’m glad you have come to Venus, Nick. I hope you’ll come talk to me often.”

Dismissed again, as if there were a whole line of people waiting to talk to the founder. Except there wasn’t. It was clear that Nick would have to go now and come back tomorrow. He stood up awkwardly. “Well, thanks for talking to me.”

“I look forward to seeing you again.”

“Yeah, me too,” Nick said, and he meant it. Even though Nick couldn’t always see his strange point of view, Jack Frasier was maybe the most interesting person he had ever met. He hurried up the stairs and reached for the door to go out into the hall. The moment he did so, he noticed that the lights behind him went out. He turned back momentarily to puzzle over this, then went on.

With an hour or so before dinner, Nick took a PM to Quadrant One on Zeta Ring. Why not? He could go anywhere he wanted, and he certainly didn’t want to go home and mope. He had looked at a map and discovered that there were farms out on Zeta and he wanted to see how farms in Venus worked. The city wasn’t big enough for wheat fields and orchards, so how did they do it?

As he whizzed along in his PM, he looked up through the top at the clouds and occasional rotorless helicopter overhead. Were these odd choppers as easy to operate as the PMs?



Maybe he would see about flying one of them. And the boats out on the waterway—who got to sail them?

How would he ever decide what he wanted to do most in Venus? So far, he was most interested in the amazing machines that built things. But he wanted to see it all before he decided. Alana studied fish and their diseases. Even Erika had found a purpose. Nick wanted to study something too. Maybe cities on the sea.

His yellow car zipped into the station next to the waterway, at the intersection of Zeta and Eta Rings, Quadrant One, and the bubble top opened to the warm, damp air. His was the only car there and for an instant Nick's mind latched onto his former world—no cars, therefore the place must be closed. But in an automated city, it didn't mean that at all. Nick smiled to himself, got out and started walking along a mulched pathway.

Up ahead, behind palm trees and splashing fountains rose a tall building made almost entirely of transparent steel—he'd learned that at a gathering—framed by white concrete. A road wide enough for cars and trucks went right through the middle of the structure and presumably out

the other side.

To the right and to the left were tunnel-sized transparent tubes stretching out for a block or more to where they connected to other buildings. As far as he could see around Zeta, buildings and tubes alternated with outdoor areas where neat rows of trees grew.

Nick ran past the spray from one of the fountains and approached the tube to his right. Like an enormous transparent worm, the surface curved upward fifteen feet against the blue sky, reflecting trees and clouds like a rounded mirror. Nick cupped his hand against the pane and peered in.

What he saw were machines on treads straddling rows of bean plants. Clipping right along, the machines stripped off the beans and deposited them in a bin at the back. At the same time, blue-and-white containers, like the ones Nick had seen in their refrigerator, scuttled along a shelf on the side of the machines until they reached the end of a row. Then all the containers were sucked into transparent tubes about a foot in diameter.

Boy, Dad sure would love this, Nick thought. And he was going to show it to him as soon as he could. It wasn't grass; these plants had real purpose.

It was easy enough to figure out that the food was picked and prepared by a single machine and sent somewhere, underground maybe, where it was delivered to the places where it was needed. Some of it was probably shipped out in trucks along the roads Nick had seen.

Making his way along the rounded see-through walls, Nick identified potatoes, corn, beets, broccoli, lettuce, and radishes. Cucumbers and tomatoes hung from lattice suspended across the top of the glass tube. Masses of roots, like thick brown hair, swam in giant vats of yellowish liquid. This was *hydroponics*, growing food without soil! He'd learned about it in one of his more boring science classes. But this wasn't boring; it was important.

He passed another section of tubing that housed dwarf fruit trees heavy with grapefruit-sized apples and oranges. A sheet made of white strings woven back and forth stretched across the tube at about the four-

foot level. The mesh not only held up the branches of the small trees, it also caught fruit as it fell off. While he stood watching, a striped apple plopped onto the sheet and rolled to the center.

Dad's just got to see this, Nick thought. There had been a time when his father liked to grow things more useful than sod, like corn and pumpkins. He missed that father, he realized, the one he had known a long time ago, before Pacific Redi-Lawn. And he really did miss the one he'd known at Venus.

Nick shrugged off the feeling—he'd bring his father straight out here the minute he got back—and walked back toward the PM station, staying close to the farm tubes so he could get another look at the plants. What did they use for fertilizer? he wondered. Why didn't the plants drown?

Back at the bean section where he had started, Nick's attention was drawn to movement behind the transparent panels and he realized a woman was inside. She noticed him at the same time and moved away. A moment later an almost-invisible door opened to his left.

“Hi,” the woman said, leaning out and waving. “Want to come in and take a look around?”

“I don't know. Is it okay?”

“Sure. Come on in.” She held the door open and Nick joined her. “I'm Shelley. I don't get visitors out here too often.”

Nick introduced himself. “I didn't realize anyone worked here. Isn't it all automated?” Somewhere fans whirred, creating a cool breeze that stirred the leaves.

Shelley, who appeared to be about twenty-five, pushed the hood back on her white rain suit. “Almost. I'm a student, actually.” Wisps of wet dark hair stuck to a brown face. “It's a little drippy in here, sorry.”

Just as she said it, a large drop of water plopped onto Nick's shoulder from the ceiling above. His eyes were drawn upward to hundreds of glistening water drops clinging to the transparent surface. *Plop.*

“Stand over here,” Shelley said, pulling him under a canopy of green leaves.

“I’ve really been curious about the food here,” Nick told her. “I mean, Venus is big, but it doesn’t seem big enough to grow everything we need.”

“We’re working on it. Come on, I’ll show you.” Shelley then led him down a wet gravel path where tubes of different colors lay like snakes along the sides. “Watch your step, there. In the future we’re going to produce plant substances instead of the plants themselves. Instead of carrots you’ll see one long, extruded vegetable that can be any length you like... with exactly the same nutrients.”

When Nick registered surprise, she added, “I know, I like the real thing too. But to feed this planet we have to come up with new ideas. We’ll be able to produce meat without slaughtering animals.”

“That would be good.”

“I think so too. It’s my pet project, so to speak.” Shelley laughed. “When we get this perfected, it’ll be much better than genetic modification. But with people starving, we have to look at alternatives. Actually, most of the foods you eat here are not what you think. Venus Pizza, for instance...” She laughed again. “Not pizza at all. It’s much more nutritious, and not fattening. Are you interested in farming?”

“I don’t know yet,” Nick said, though farming like this could be interesting. “I might like to work with wind power, or design buildings, or maybe pilot a boat. I really like it in Venus, so far. Most places you can’t really pick, you know what I mean?”

Shelley nodded in agreement.

“My dad grew sod, out there.” He gestured toward the walls and the world outside of Venus. “You can’t eat it,” he added. “I guess you could say it’s just a decoration.” Nick snickered an apology.

“Lawn feels good to walk on, though. I love to go barefoot... we actually have quite a bit of sod in Venus.”

“Yeah, I noticed that.”

Shelley picked up a tray of seedlings and moved it to another table.

“One of our scientists is working on a variety that refrigerates the air in the summer and heats it in the winter, if you can call it winter in Florida. Here hold this.”

She handed him the nozzle end of a yellow hose and pulled it further up from the floor. “Everything here does double duty” she explained. “Go ahead and add some water there.”

When Nick hesitated, she said, “I know, we’re automated, but I like the hands-on approach. I personally think the plants have gotten to know me.”

“Oh, really?”

“Sure... well, who knows?” Shelley said. “I like the idea.”

Maybe not scientific, but Nick liked Shelley. With an inward smile, he squeezed the nozzle and did as she asked, directing a pale blue rain onto all the boxes on the table.

“Every drop of the water in this greenhouse gets recycled to keep our air conditioning running,” Shelley went on, then she took Nick through three long transparent steel tubes, showing him how giant potatoes were grown in vats. They looked like miniature hippos floating around under murky water.

“I love this,” Shelley said, pointing to one of the *babies*. “One potato—”

Pssst! The lights flickered, then went out. The fans stopped.

Nick looked around and above him. Only a glow from the fading daylight illuminated the tube where they were standing. “Whoa... what’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Shelley said. “This never happens.” She spoke into her Teleguide. “This is Zeta-One, Farm Sector 1589. We’ve had a power failure. Can you explain?” She paused for an answer.

Nick knew there could be a dozen reasons why the power would go out, but he thought about Tony. Had he done something down in the bowels of Venus to knock out the power?

“Sensors will let us know what happened,” Shelley told him. “But this is probably a good time for us to leave. It’s getting pretty dark.”

“Okay,” Nick said. “Maybe I can come back sometime.”

“Yes, do,” Shelley said. “Will you be okay? I have my bike here.”

“I think so,” Nick said. “The PM station is right over there.” They said goodbye quickly and Nick jogged to the station near the waterway.

But now he had a creepy feeling. How did the PMs work? he wondered. Did they depend on electricity? What about the Radial, the Orcs, and all the other systems in Venus?

Suddenly the distances around the rings of Venus seemed much longer, and he questioned why he’d come all the way out here in the first place. He was a long way from Domicile 84, and if Tony had done this on purpose there was no telling how long the power outage would last.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The PM park wasn't far away, just on the far side of a row of trees and bushes. What if Nick encountered an alligator out here? He turned on his Teleguide light and directed its thin beam back and forth across the path. He hated that a little thing like a power failure could make him so nervous.

He ran, thinking anything that lay in the grass wouldn't have time to strike. Ahh, the solar lights along the path glowed as usual. Maybe he would get lucky and the PMs would be solar too; he'd never thought to ask.

He made his way to the same car he had used earlier, closed the top and spoke his destination. To his relief, it moved out onto the road and picked up speed. Bright lights dotted every ring of Venus as he whizzed along. Green Orcons glowed at the intersections and in the distance he could see the high, rounded top of the Central Dome. Only the smaller domes seemed completely dark.

The tone on his Teleguide sounded and Nick's mother was speaking to him. "It's dark over here, Nick. And everything is malfunctioning. Erika's here. Are you okay?"

"I'm in a PM, and the solars are working everywhere. What do you mean 'malfunctioning'?" His car whizzed across a large expanse of grass and over a bridge.

"The Clothes Exchange sent back a size 16—I wear a 12," she sounded embarrassed. "And I can't get the menu table to work. I don't mind cooking, but..."

"I'll be there in a few minutes." Not that Nick knew how to fix anything. Maybe Mom just wanted everyone home. Except Dad; he wasn't going to be there. Nick imagined the shower getting stuck and flooding the dome. How did appliances get repaired in Venus; weren't they supposed to fix themselves?

He wondered again about Tony, how he'd been so interested in the workings in underground Venus. Then again, maybe it had nothing to do

with Tony. Maybe a tree fell on a windmill. What tree? There were none out there where the windmills churned away. Still, there could be a lot of explanations.

No sooner had his mother rung off than Alana called him. “I was wondering about you. My Teleguide says you’re just coming into Epsilon Ring.”

She was wondering about him—nice. “Yeah, I was over in one of the farms when the electricity went off. What do you think caused it?”

“I don’t know. This scares me. It’s never happened before, not since I’ve been in Venus.” Alana sounded upset too. “As long as the windmills are moving, we just always have power.” She was silent while Nick imagined her looking around her in the dark. “We’re supposed to have back-up systems.”

“It’s probably nothing,” He said, trying to make her feel better. “It happened all the time in Skagit.”

“Really?”

“Sure, storms mostly.” The Epsilon-Eight car park lay just around the next curve. Nick felt his car bank as it pulled in. “Here I am at the station,” he told Alana. Opening the bubble top, he surveyed the area.

“The path looks dark, but I’ll be along in a minute.” He didn’t tell her he’d been as nervous as everyone else. If he’d had to walk all this way, it would have taken him hours to get home. Nick made his way along the mulched path, watching for the smallest movement in the grass.

Then as suddenly as they had flicked off, lights came back on. Circles of light from domicile windows shone between the trees. Nick let out a whoop, smiled, and turned a full circle on the path. *Venus comes through*, he thought.

At about the same time, he passed the path to Alana’s dome and he veered off in her direction, calling her on his Teleguide as he walked.

Alana answered. “Saved, we’ve got power again. You made it.”

“Yep, right outside.”

Alana appeared at the door of her dome. The light from inside shone right through her silky hair. “I’m so relieved,” she said and

stepped outside. “Weren’t you worried?”

“Maybe a little.”

“You’re getting the hang of this place.” Alana ducked under a palm frond and past a low bush of white flowers to meet Nick on the path. “A lot of people move in here, then move right back out again.”

“Really? Like who?”

“Curtis, for one. Remember him?”

Nick remembered, though he hadn’t thought about Curtis in a long time. “What happened?”

“His dad got a paying job in Chicago. But you’re made for Venus; I could tell that right away,” she told him.

Her comment made Nick smile. *Made for Venus*—maybe he was. “Thanks,” he said. “Venus is the best, even if we lose power once in a while.” In a wave of warmth, he decided it would be safe to tell her about the Pinewood house and his dad leaving to take care of it.

“That’s awful,” Alana said. “No one needs to steal anything here.”

“Yeah, well it sure isn’t like that out there.”

Alana glanced over her shoulder. “I think Louise is ordering our dinner now that the power is on. Do you want to go see who’s at the CD when we’re done?”

“Sure,” Nick said. “I’ll see what’s going on.” What he meant was, he’d run it by his mother. With a hop in his step, he jogged the rest of the way home. As soon as he approached Dome 84, the glass panel recognized him and slid open, then closed behind him.

With all the systems working again, dinner had already been ordered and was arranged on the bar. Nick had just pulled himself onto a stool when the telephone sounded.

“Hello,” Mom said. She looked surprised, then angry—it had to be Dad. She listened for a minute, then turned and said, “Do you kids mind? I need a little privacy.”

Nick felt his stomach twist. He hated that his life and what happened to him was so tied to what his father did. Feeling like an eight-year-old, he followed his sister out onto the little patio, where he settled into a chair. “I don’t think this is good.”

“He’s going to make us go back to Skagit,” Erika guessed. “Back where it rains all the time.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Nick said, but he knew he wouldn’t have any power over what was decided. A few minutes later, Mom came to the door and stepped outside. She wasn’t smiling.

She smoothed her shirt with nervous hands, then came right out and said it: “The merger may be back on. Your father’s going to be staying in the Seattle area for a while. He’s thinking about renting an apartment.”

“I knew it!” Nick jumped up, his voice much louder than he intended. “The merger, who cares about the *merger*? He said he was glad to be out of the corporate life. He said—”

“I know all that,” Mom interrupted, “but I guess a lot has changed in three weeks.” She didn’t sound angry any more, just resigned. She sighed, leaned back against the dome. Her eyes glistened.

Nick sat down again. “He said he was done with all that.” He’d been suspicious all along, and now this confirmed it. His negative attitude had been the right one. Being positive just got you disappointments. Now he saw a man who couldn’t make up his mind about anything, couldn’t even figure out what made him happy. And it was clear, his father didn’t care one bit about anyone else in the family.

“When do we have to leave?” Erika asked. “Will I get my back allowance?”

Mom didn’t answer at first, then she got a determined look on her face. “No, you won’t need any allowance, Erika. We’re not going anywhere. Not again.” She straightened.

Nick and Erika looked at each other. “So... what’s going to happen?” Nick ventured. “Like, you and Dad will live in two different places?”

“I’m not sure,” his mother said. “We’ll have to work that out. But the house isn’t livable right now anyway.”

Nick heard her but he was afraid to let hope seep back in. And he was ashamed of his feelings anyway. He wanted to stay, that part was clear, but... his parents... would they even stay married? The thought made him shiver. Surely, it couldn’t mean that.

“What’d they do?” he asked, changing the subject. “The vandals, I mean.” He wanted to know, and he didn’t want to know.

“The bricks in the fireplace have been smashed...”

“Did they go into my room?” he asked.

“They went all over the house. I didn’t want the details.”

Nick stood up and folded his arms, gazing off toward the foliage. In spite of his anger, he could understand what was happening, sort of. His father was back in the real world, as if he’d been snapped back on the end of a bungee cord. When he thought of it this way, he felt sorry for him.

Nick should have known this wasn’t going to work. You couldn’t just run away and live on another planet, it just didn’t work that way. Paul-the-Neanderthal lived in Skagit, but Venus had Tony Tralco. And that was just one of the problems.

After a gloomy dinner, Nick asked permission and went across the footbridge to get Alana. *Alana*. She was one true ray of sun in his life now.

As he crossed he heard a rustle in the grass behind him, but his Teleguide flashlight revealed nothing at all. Then *splash!* Nick jumped, even though he should have been used to it by now.

Alana met him outside, wearing her body suit. “I’m telling you, Nick, you ought to get one of these. They’re perfectly temperature controlled.”

“No thanks,” Nick said, “I’m sort of a jeans and T-shirts type, you know what I mean?” The only thing on his mind was his father, but he had decided not to spoil everything by talking about it.

“I guess so, but you ought to see a microscopic magnification of this fabric. It’s really interesting.”

“Everything here is ‘interesting’,” he answered. “It’s going to take me twenty years just to figure it all out, if I get to stay here that long. What’s at the CD?” he asked.

“It’s Egypt Night. Virtual Reality. I’m hoping some of the other kids will be there.” Even in the darkness Nick could see Alana flash one of her perfect white smiles. “Follow me,” she said. “I know a shortcut.”

Alana strode off the main path straight into jungle, and Nick followed nervously. They were on a path of sorts, but it was so poorly defined that Nick knew he would get lost instantly if it weren't for his guide. Then they connected to another path, and another.

They had walked only a short distance when Nick saw the outline of a person up ahead of them carrying a load of something. Nick could see right away who it was; there were not many people in Venus who were so heavy.

“Stop,” Nick whispered. “That’s Peyton Tralco. You know, Tony, that kid we saw at the Radial, the one who’s been in trouble.”

Alana stopped walking and talked in a low voice. “What’s he doing?”

“I don’t know,” Nick said. “I’d say, taking out the garbage, but... you know.”

“Yeah, we’re automated. Come on, let’s follow him.” Alana crept forward.

Nick hesitated and pushed a branch out of the way to get a better look. Wherever they were, there were no Orcs to light their way, or even a moon in the sky. They didn’t dare use Teleguides. “It’s pitch black out here,” Nick said.

“It’s okay,” Alana said. “I know every inch of this area.”

Stepping carefully through the foliage, Nick followed her, staying a safe distance from Tony. They saw the kid make his way slowly, stopping twice to shift his load. Finally, he emerged onto a wider path and quickened his pace.

Nick and Alana waited until he had moved a hundred yards or so down the path and then stepped out behind him. Ten minutes later, they were back at the entrance to Venus, where the Hammonds had said goodbye to Dad.

“He must be leaving,” Nick whispered. “Geez, I knew he didn’t like it here. I even asked him why he didn’t just leave. I guess he’s taking my suggestion.”

“If Juvenile Detention sent him, I don’t think he’s supposed to just leave.”

Tony went through the entrance out onto the gravel. Nick and Alana crept closer. A bird sang out in the darkness, and Nick jumped. Alana did not seem nervous at all, but then she'd lived at Venus for a long time. Only power outages worried her.

"Look. I guess he's leaving in style." Alana pointed.

There was Tony gallumping toward a limousine. John Daniels again—did he camp outside Venus, or what? The driver was leaning against the side of the car, lighting a cigarette against a cupped hand. Illuminated by the match, his chin and bony nose seemed sharper than usual.

Tony approached and said something, but he didn't get into the limo. Instead, he handed Daniels the load he'd been carrying. They talked for a minute, John Daniels looked into the bag, then he put everything into the car. Before he got back in and drove off, he handed something small to Tony, an envelope maybe. Then Tony turned and started toward them.

"I've seen enough," Nick said, "let's get out of here."

The two of them crept back up the path. When they got to the greeting shed, Alana opened it and they pushed inside. Huddling behind the door, they waited.

"Should we report him to Jack Fraiser?" Nick whispered.

"For what?"

"Well, I don't know. He's probably not up to anything good, and I wouldn't be surprised if he had something to do with the power outage."

"There aren't any laws here," Alana reminded him. "So there's no way to break one. Let's just wait and see what happens."

It was obvious Tony was doing something that would be illegal anywhere else. Maybe Alana was just naïve and was living off of her positive attitude. Except, a positive attitude didn't always work in the real world, the world where Tony and Nick had both grown up. Where his father was now going to live again.

Two minutes later, Tony passed by them. He was empty-handed except for a cigarette with a tiny red glow at one end, just like Daniels. The smell wafted right into the shed where Nick and Alana were

crouched. They waited for Tony to move a safe distance beyond them, then left the shed and quietly closed the door behind them.

None of the other kids were at the Central Dome when they got there, so Nick and Alana walked around in the night air for a while, sat for a long while at the lemon tree nutrition center, and talked.

“I guess my dad’s not coming back for a while,” Nick told her. “He’s going to stay to run his business.” He felt close to her tonight after stalking Tony through the jungle.

“I wondered about that,” she said. “I’m really sorry. What are you going to do?”

“My mom says we’re staying, but I don’t know...”

“She could change her mind.” Alana looked worried. “There still aren’t that many kids here. Curtis is gone and...”

“We’re staying. We have to,” Nick said. “This is the best place I’ve ever lived. Things matter here. I feel like an adult.”

Alana talked about her fish and the work she was doing with Erika. “Maybe if you find a project your parents will see how much you’re needed here.”

“I’m working on it,” Nick said. There did seem to be some urgency suddenly. As if he had to find his place and then fill in the spaces around it with concrete. They talked for over an hour about nothing in particular, then got up to leave. By then the moon had come up and was high in the sky; Nick wondered why his mother hadn’t called looking for him. Maybe she was beginning to trust him, to trust Venus.

When the door slid open at Dome 84, his mother looked up and said, “Oh, there you are,” but that was all.

Erika wanted to talk over the wall that separated the two sides of their room. Nick half listened to her while he thought his own thoughts—about Alana and his dad, and about Tony Tralco. He couldn’t do anything about his father, but he sure would like to know what Tony had been up to.

First, the lights going out and then his non-escape from Venus. Maybe Jack Frasier thought everyone was good, but Nick knew better. If Tony and John Daniels were meeting at night outside the city, it couldn’t

be good for Venus.

The next morning, Nick turned left outside the Hammonds' dome, and asked his Teleguide for Peyton Tralco's address.

"Domicile 70 on Epsilon-Seven."

"Thanks," Nick answered. So Tony lived on the same ring, but the next quadrant over. He picked up his pace along the path, going in the opposite direction from the Radial. He'd never been this far down the path, and everything was unfamiliar; a long narrow pond with a dead tree lying across it, a small domed building with a screened porch, and other domiciles. Soon he found number 70 and knocked. He hadn't thought what he'd do if Tony weren't there. Ardith was already standing at the slider door and opened it. "Yeah."

"Is Tony here?"

"Yeah. Hey Peyton, your little friend is here to see you." Tony's voice answered from within the dome. Ardith stood aside. "He's in there."

Little friend. Maybe Nick did look little next to Tony and his sister. She appeared thinner than the first time Nick had seen her, but she still had that angry look on her face. Tony's mother sat huddled over a desk, and nodded when he walked by. The kitchen in this dome was on the opposite side from the Hammonds' and had a built-in table instead of a bar.

"Hey, Tony." Nick went into a room lighted only by the round window. In the gloom, Tony sat at a desk with a cage in front of him. Inside the cage were two fat white rats with long naked tails.

Nick recoiled at the sight, but he approached and pretended to be interested. "Hi. What're you doing there?"

Tony turned toward him. "What I'm always doing. Training my rats."

They didn't seem to be doing much except eating. "Training them to do what?"

"Things. Useful things." He adjusted his shirt and smirked.

"The lights went out last night," Nick said, and waited. He watched Tony's round face for signs of guilt or knowing. Tony didn't flinch.

“Yeah, I know. Looks like this place isn’t so perfect after all.”

Nick shrugged, feeling defensive. “I don’t know about that. There were enough solar lights to get me home, and the PMs ran just fine.”

“There wasn’t any air conditioning, and the Transveyors got stuck. That’s what I heard anyway.”

Nick busied himself looking around Tony’s room. It was a mess. He hadn’t even activated his bed to change the sheets and he hadn’t sent his laundry down the shoot. Nick didn’t know whether to be angry or feel sorry for him. One side of the dome was stacked with boxes of things that looked brand new.

“What’s all this stuff?” Nick asked. “You go shopping?”

“Yeah. Anything wrong with that?”

“Nope, not a thing. I can tell you, though, you get bored with it real fast. Even my sister doesn’t shop much any more.”

Tony reached into the cage, wrapped his hand around one of the rats and brought it out. Its paws raked the air in front of Nick’s face. Nick reared back.

“They won’t hurt you,” Tony said with a snicker.

“I know,” Nick said, keeping his eye on the rat. It was kind of cute actually, with a pointed pink nose twitching at him. He patted its tiny head to show Tony that he wasn’t scared. “I just thought I’d stop in to say hello.”

Tony put the rat back in the cage, and Nick thought about leaving, but then he said, “Hey, Tony, I saw you last night.”

“Yeah?”

“Out by the entrance to Venus.”

“So what?”

“I’ll bet you were selling things to John Daniels, weren’t you? Getting them free in Venus and then selling them.”

Tony turned to face Nick with a smirk. “What are you gonna do. Turn me in?”

“No.” Nick leaned against the doorway. So he’d guessed right. “And you probably had something to do with the power going out. Except it didn’t work, because Venus has more than one system.”

“Maybe it wasn’t me,” Tony said. He closed the door on the cage. The other rat was busy chewing the rubber off a piece of wire. Didn’t Tony even give them real food?

“But,” Tony added, “you have to wonder... if someone did it on purpose, they might get it right next time.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Had Tony just confessed? Not exactly, but Nick shook his head in irritation. “You don’t need money in Venus, Tony. There’s nowhere to spend it.”

“Since when is Venus the center of the universe?” Tony crossed his arms across his chest. “Outside this invisible wall, money will get me a long way.”

“Maybe it will, but you’ll be here for a long time...” Tony looked pathetic with his face set in a permanent scowl. Not everyone makes it in Venus, Alana had said. Maybe Tony wouldn’t make it here or anywhere else. Still, Nick felt sorry for him. They were in the same city, and in some ways they were in similar situations: they were in here while their fathers were out there.

“Look,” Nick said. “I’m hungry. We could get some lunch. Sometimes I go talk to Jack Frasier when I’m at the CD. I like him. You could go with me after we eat.”

“Are you kidding?” Tony answered. The look on his face said, *why would I want to see that idiot?*

Nick shouldn’t have been surprised, but he always was. “Okay, whatever... I just thought I’d ask.” Actually, Nick couldn’t wait to get out of Tony’s messy bedroom and away from his rats.

He left, saying quick goodbyes to Mrs. Tralco and Ardit. These people sure didn’t seem like the types Jack Frasier would want in his city of the future. But maybe the state of Florida had made a deal—ten tons of concrete for a new and improved Tony Tralco.

Nick walked briskly back up the path, trying to shake his feelings about Tony. Within minutes, he felt better with the warm sun on his back and the clean air in his lungs. An awesome green bird sang out on a branch over his head. Puffy, red flowers brushed against his legs as he strode past. Oranges and lemons hung on trees just off the path. A man jogged by and smiled at him.

How could anyone not want to be here? How could money be more

interesting than this?

The notion that Nick did not want to leave Venus seemed to be growing stronger every day. If Venus needed 30,000 people, why couldn't the Hammonds just live here permanently? Mom didn't want to leave, and Erika liked it too. If his father didn't want to be with them, well, that was his decision, wasn't it?

Nick took a PM to the Central Dome. Approaching the building, he drank in the look and feel of the place—his own space station right here in Florida. Where everything worked like you'd think it should. A city that thinks, Rachel Mathews had called it.

He sprinted to the CD, past the enormous holographic globe where a group of people had gathered. They seemed to be watching a new white swirl of storm off the coast of Florida—rain again, Nick thought with a twinge of disappointment. It seemed like it should always be sunny in Florida. Hurrying past them, he went up the Transveyor to the Orientation Theater.

Nick looked down the rows of steps where the Hammonds had lined up together that first morning. His heart bumped a little remembering how excited his father had been as he listened to Jack Frasier talk about Venus. Now Frasier himself was the closest thing Nick had to a father.

“Hello, Nick,” Mr. Frasier said. As usual he was sitting on his stool with his hands folded in his lap. He wore the very same khaki shirt rolled up at the sleeves and his hat with the brim tipped to the side. He smiled in his friendly way, giving Nick a feeling of happiness.

“Do you have a question today?”

“Well, not exactly,” Nick said. He sat down on a spongy step and waited for it to move into place. “I just want to talk about some things.”

Frasier tilted his head and swiveled on his stool to face Nick. “All right. You can talk about anything that interests you.”

Nick liked the way he was always willing to listen. “Well, for one thing, I was wondering about the machines. You know, the ones that are building the apartment complexes.”

“Yes, they’re amazing, aren’t they?”

“Where do you get the machines? Wouldn’t you have to buy them

somewhere? It seems like they're too big for you to build them yourself.”

“Why, the machines build themselves,” Frasier said as if that should be obvious. “I constructed the first one on the computer, creating a pattern. After that the machines themselves knew where every part and fastener was to go.”

“Oh.”

“They repair themselves too.”

Nick still did not quite understand. Was there a huge garage somewhere in Venus where all this happened? “So, where are they stored?” Nick asked.

Pictures appeared behind Frasier showing huge machines at work, some Nick had not yet seen. All seemed to be on treads with arms to lift and move things.

“When MAIRS are not needed, they either wait for assignments or disassemble themselves.”

“The machines are called MAIRS?”

“Yes, that’s Multi-Access Industrial Robots.” The picture flashed to enormous bins, long rows of them, full of machine parts.

“I can promise you, Nick, that everything in Venus works very well.”

“I know,” Nick said. “I just got out of a PM.”

“Good. So you know firsthand.”

“Yeah, a girl I met says that anyone can do anything they want in Venus.”

“She was correct,” Frasier said, showing his white teeth in a friendly smile. “What would you like to do?”

Nick had been thinking about it for some time. “Do you think I could work with the machines somehow? Learn about them, help design new ones?”

“We need all kinds of skills in Venus. We welcome anyone who wants to learn. I think you would be very good at designing machines, Nick.”

“Really? But how do I do that? Wouldn’t I need classes?”

“All of Venus is a classroom,” Frasier reminded him. “The answer is at a gathering or on your computer.”

Nick should have known that would be the response. It seemed that Frasier always wanted him to find out things for himself. Okay, so Nick would click around on his computer later. The robot machines—it was very clear now that they were what he wanted to study.

“Is there anything else on your mind, Nick?”

Yes, there was one thing, but Nick didn’t want to tattle on Tony. “I want to know about the lights,” he said, “They were out for a while last night.”

“We have many redundancies here,” Frasier said. “Very few lights in Venus went out. They came back on quickly. A rodent chewed through a wire in a control room. No harm done.”

“A rodent?” Nick felt his mouth open. *A white rodent?* Tony had trained his rats to chew through wires; they weren’t eating the rubber off like he’d thought, not exactly. They were just *removing* it!

“So whose fault was it? I mean, was anyone responsible for the lights going out?”

“A rodent chewed through a wire in a control room,” Frasier repeated mechanically.

Obviously, Frasier didn’t want to talk about it so Nick went on to another topic. “When do you think other cities in America will be like this one?” He’d asked before, but it was what he really wanted to know.

“‘When’ is a relative term,” Frasier said. It was the same thing he always said. As before, he turned on his stool and looked right into Nick’s eyes. “Life is no longer sustainable the way we’ve been living. When people do not need money, their efforts can be used in better ways.” He paused and took a deep breath.

Wait a minute! Nick thought. Frasier must have forgotten that they’d already had this conversation. And, he was not only repeating his words; he was repeating his movements too. This was weird.

Nick felt his scalp tighten and a lump dropped down his throat.

“When people are ready,” Frasier continued, “Cities all over the world will convert to the Venus system.” His tan face worked as he

talked, exactly the same way it had before.

What was going on? Nick stared without saying anything until Frasier said, “Do you have another question, Nick?”

Nick’s mind leapt down below to the holographic globe. It was an exact duplicate of the earth, the same in every detail.

He looked up at the figure on the platform. Frasier was always there. He kept repeating himself. Had anyone ever actually touched him?

“Do you have another question, Nick?”

Nick felt his mouth drop open. He stood up and ran his hands nervously down the legs of his pants. He moved a step closer. The man adjusted his gaze to continue looking at him, but he didn’t move. Nick took another step, feeling sick inside.

“Do you have another question, Nick?”

Nick didn’t know what to do. Troubling thoughts swirled in his mind. If Jack Frasier was actually sitting there, Nick was going to feel like a fool for thinking otherwise. But if he wasn’t... what did it mean? That no one was really in charge in Venus? That there had never been a Jack Frasier at all? That there was no place in this world for Nick Hammond, after all?

“Yes, I have another question,” Nick said. How could he phrase this? His heart pounded. “Um, my math teacher back home—I’ve forgotten her name. Let’s see... it’s either Koster or Kallihan?”

“We have no classrooms in Venus. When people are ready, cities all over the world will convert to the Venus system.”

“When will that happen?” Nick asked, moving even closer.

“‘When’ is a relative term.”

Directly in front of Jack Frasier now, Nick slowly reached out his hand to touch the man’s fist, folded in his lap. But instead of connecting with flesh, Nick touched nothing but air. Then he waved his hand right through Jack Frasier, back and forth. Images of the man with the brown face and wide-brimmed hat swam across Nick’s own arm.

Nick gasped and looked around the room, wondering if there was anyone there, running a projector maybe. But no, the place was

automated. Even Jack Frasier was automated—a hologram, same as the globe downstairs!

Nick ran up the stairs two at a time. Maybe Peyton Tralco was a lot smarter than Nick. Maybe Dad's decision to leave had been the right one. Nick's stomach squeezed together—What could he do now? Where could he go? Not back to Skagit.

“Good bye, Nick. You can come and talk to me any time you want to. I’m always here.”

“Of course you are,” Nick yelled back at the image. What a dope I am, he thought. How could he have been so fooled? He’d been in here a half dozen times talking to a *hologram*. He’d even made friends with him! Was everything in Venus a fake, after all? Food that just looked like pizza but was actually made from a vitamin paste. Trains that didn’t touch the ground and cars that flew over things. Clothes that showed up on Erika in mirrors.

Alana! Did she know about this? Had she been lying to him?

Nick’s fingers tapped his sides impatiently as the Transveyor took him back to the first floor. He raced past the globe and outside into the sunshine. At least that was real, or he thought it was. He had to see Alana, and he stopped long enough to call her on his Teleguide. “I gotta see you,” he said, out of breath. “Are you home?”

“No,” she said, “I’m at the NutritionCenter out on Delta Ring. It’s beautiful out here, but the sky is beginning to cloud up.”

Nick looked upward. Now he could see that a giant dark lid of clouds had closed over half the sky. The holographic globe was never wrong. “I’ll meet you there, and we can head home together.”

Nick made his way quickly to the car park, blinking to hold back tears. Dumb, he scolded himself.

He climbed into a PM, and directed it to Alana’s location. But a minute into his journey, another thought came to him: Alana! She was so perfect. Maybe too perfect! Her eyes looked like windows to somewhere else. And what would a real girl see in a guy like Nick? Especially one who was a whole year younger.

A hologram wouldn’t have parents; maybe it would just call them

by their first names like Louise and Burt! Nick's heart seemed to fall into his stomach. He tried to remember if he'd ever touched her. He must have. They'd been crouched very close together last night.

Could a girl be programmed so carefully that a dumb guy would think she actually liked him? No, it wasn't possible. A hologram couldn't walk around, could it? Yet Jack Frasier had walked back and forth across a platform.

By the time Nick got off at the NutritionCenter, he was so disoriented that he could hardly think. He felt nauseated, and the sweat beading on his face was not just because of the Florida humidity.

He took a shortcut over a bank of rocks and ran up the walkway. There was Alana, sitting at a table outdoors wearing her blue sun dress, the skirt rippling around her knees in the breeze. The sight felt comforting—what was more real than wind? Even Alana's blond-white hair was blowing away from her face. Could holographic hair do that? Nick stopped at a curve of concrete wall and waited.

In front of Alana was a plate of green salad and a sandwich. *Go on, take a bite.* He waited, opening his own mouth as if he were willing her to do the same, but she didn't touch her food.

Suddenly she turned as if she sensed someone watching her. "Hi," she called and indicated the chair opposite her. Just like a real person. Nick walked slowly across the lawn and lowered himself into the chair. Some people sitting nearby got up and left. Another sat down.

"Is anything wrong?" Alana asked. "You look so, I don't know..."

Without thinking, Nick grabbed her hand, a real flesh-and-blood hand with bones giving it shape. "You're real," he said, letting out his breath.

Alana laughed. "Well, yeah. What's going on?" She pulled her hand away and eyed him. "You look so upset."

"Alana," Nick began, "Something really weird just happened. I don't know what to think. It's about Jack Frasier."

"What about him?" she tucked her napkin beside her plate and started to stand up. "Can you tell me on the way home? It's going to rain."

“I know,” Nick said. “But this is important. What do you know about this man? Have you ever actually talked to him?”

“Well...” Alana was obviously confused. “I know he’s the founder of Venus and that no one knows exactly where he lives. I know he designed almost everything in Venus.”

“How could he?” Nick asked. “Alana, think about it. This place is like Disney World. He couldn’t have designed everything and still sit in that Orientation Theater all day answering questions.”

“Nick... come on.” Then the half-smile slid off her face and her tone changed. “I don’t want to talk about this.” She pushed her plate in front of him. “Here, I’m not that hungry.” Her napkin blew away.

Nick stood up and grabbed her shoulders, one hand on each side. He looked straight into her pale blue eyes. Alana pulled back. “Alana, I know this is going to sound crazy, but I just found out... I found out that the Jack Frasier who sits on the stool at the Orientation Theater is...” She wasn’t going to like this.

“Alana, he’s nothing but a hologram, just like that big globe in the CD!”

Alana crossed her arms over her sundress but didn’t say anything at first. Nick nodded and sat down again. “It’s true. I tried to touch him but there wasn’t anything there.”

“But that’s crazy,” Alana said, looking away. She turned back. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” He stared at her, waiting for her to catch up. He could imagine what was going through her mind as she looked off into space. She had been here since she was eight years old, thinking this was a real city with someone in charge. Thinking there was actually a founder who would make sure things ran smoothly.

“Oh... my gosh,” Alana whispered finally. “Rachel Mathews—she’s not... She’s been over to our house for lunch. She’s as real as you can get.”

“Yeah, this is weird, but I can’t be mistaken. I mean, there was *nothing* there, Alana!” Nick’s heart beat fast as the enormity of his discovery set in. “I feel like we should report this, but who... ? There are

no police. No mayor.”

Then Nick knew what he would do; he’d call his dad. His father had gotten them into this. He even said he’d met Jack Frasier. But had he only met a hologram, the same one Nick had come to like so much?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“I have to talk to my dad,” Nick announced. Except his father had always placed the calls to the Hammonds’ domicile, and he hadn’t called every day. Nick needed to talk to him now. “The phone company charges money,” he said. “How can I call Skagit?”

“Oh... I have no idea,” Alana said. “I don’t know anyone out there.”

Nick asked his Teleguide, and the female voice answered, “Only commerce quadrants are programmed to make calls outside the city. May I transfer you to a commerce quadrant?”

“Um...” Nick wasn’t sure what she meant. Commerce had to do with selling things. What did Venus sell? Food maybe. Then he thought of Shelley out on Zeta Ring. He didn’t know her last name, but he asked for her location, then waited. Shelley herself answered.

“Hi, Nick. I see you survived the power outage.”

“Yes, I did. Hey, I was wondering about something. Are the farms in a ‘commerce quadrant’?”

“Yes, of course. Why do you ask?”

Nick explained and she offered to place the call to his father’s cell phone.

Nick smiled in Alana’s direction. “Turn on your phone, Dad. Turn on your phone,” Nick mumbled while he waited. Then his father was picking up, saying hello in his familiar stern voice. He said he was at the Pinewood house. He’d bought a new vacuum and was cleaning up. Someone was there repairing the broken fireplace mantle. He sounded angry and frustrated.

Maybe Nick should have gone with him. Except if he’d gone, he wouldn’t know about Jack Frasier, and he’d be wishing he were back in Venus.

“So, what’s up?” Dad asked, giving Nick an opening.

“Well...” Nick sat down at the table again. “You aren’t going to believe this.”

“Oh?”

“You said you met Jack Frasier, right? Before we came out here?”

“Right,” Dad said. “I was very impressed. Nick, I still think the philosophy of Venus is a good one. It’s just that...”

He was going to talk about the real world again, Nick could tell. “Did you meet him in person, or was he, you know, just on that platform giving his talk?”

“No, I actually went in and talked to him,” Dad said. “I sat in the auditorium for about fifteen minutes—he’s a busy man—and he answered all my questions.”

So his father had been fooled too. “Um, Dad,” Nick began. “I’ve been to the Orientation Theater quite a few times, and today I found out that the man sitting there is not exactly what you’d think.”

“Oh?” he father repeated. “What do you mean?”

“Dad, Jack Frasier is nothing but a hologram. I tried to touch him, but there was no one there.” Nick waited, his heart pounding for more than one reason.

After a very long silence, Nick said, “Dad, you still there?”

“Yes, I’m still here. A *hologram*. I should have figured it out. Venus certainly has the technology...” He sighed and went silent again.

“Dad?”

“Look, Nick. I’ll see about getting a flight back to Orlando. I’d better find out what’s going on.” He grumbled something, then said, “Looks like this has been one huge mistake. I owe your mom an apology.”

“No, it’s no one’s fault,” Nick said, and he meant it. “We all wanted it to be true.” He felt his chest tighten and looked sadly at Alana, who was waiting to hear what was being said. If the Hammonds had to leave Venus, maybe Alana would go too. She’d hinted that she might like to see a place where it got cold in winter.

“And Nick,” his father went on. “Be careful, okay? I have no way of knowing what this means. It could be nothing more harmful than a marketing gimmick, but it’s obviously supposed to be a secret. A committee could be running the place, or some mega-corporation.” He sounded disgusted.

Nick's own mind raced. Maybe Venus was actually a theme park, except tickets into a theme park cost a lot of money. Were the families running up bills that would show up at their domiciles one of these days? *If it's too good to be true, it probably is.* Nick had heard those words plenty of times.

"And, look, Nick-boy." Dad laughed a little. "Don't say anything to your mom, okay? I'll have to find a way to tell her..."

Nick hadn't even thought about breaking this to his mother; she was going to be as devastated as he was. He stared down at his Teleguide a full thirty seconds after the call to his father ended. Everyone was going to be affected. He was going to have to admit to Hank that Venus hadn't worked out. He'd probably never see Tony again, so he didn't matter, but the Hammonds would have to go back to Skagit where everything was ordinary and unimportant. The thought was too depressing

He explained as best he could to Alana, who looked shocked, then sad, then angry. "But Nick," she said. "That's not fair. Shouldn't we check this out first?"

"I don't know," Nick said. "If Venus is just a big ride, we can't really live here, can we? I mean, parks close eventually."

Alana just looked at him defiantly and raised her wrist. "Jack Frasier's address please."

The frown on Alana's face told Nick the Teleguide hadn't given her the address. Alana changed tactics. "Rachel Mathews' address please."

She's in for a letdown, Nick thought.

"Theta-Four. Domicile One." Alana repeated. She turned to Nick. "I'm going to find out what's going on. Are you with me or not?"

Nick wanted to believe, but logic told him he'd seen behind the curtain at Venusland and nothing would be the same again. Still, he nodded. If there was an explanation, any kind of explanation, he wanted to hear it before his father arrived. And, he couldn't walk away from Alana, even if all he did was be there when she figured it out for herself.

The two moved swiftly to the Radial and rode to where they could transfer to the mag-lev on Theta.

"Hurry," Alana coaxed. She took Nick's hand and pulled him

along. “I was pretty sure Jack Frasier lived on Beta Ring, but Rachel Mathews might be able to tell us something.”

Skirting along a cliff bordering the waterway, they passed several domiciles with curved walls angling upward or towers made mostly of glass. Palm trees, now whipping in the wind, made a whooshing sound as the two broke into a run.

Nick scanned the skyline, wondering which of these mansions might belong to Rachel Mathews. And who was she anyway? A hologram had introduced her at orientation and she had carried on as if Jack Frasier was actually sitting right there.

“This should be it,” Alana said, stopping at an intersection of two paths. “I don’t see a domicile, though.” Consulting her Teleguide again she said, “Down there,” and pointed toward a tree-lined path. “It must be a long way off the road.”

They turned left, away from the water, and followed the path that dipped down flat at first, and then at a steeper angle. It was less windy here, but the sky had turned a slate gray. Spiny cactus-like plants, banana trees, and a mat of bushes grew along the edges, so dense that it was impossible to see what might be on the other side.

“I wonder where we are,” Nick commented fifteen minutes later. “Are we even in Venus any more?”

“I don’t know,” Alana said, catching her breath. “I’ve never been out here, but the Teleguide says this is the right way. Let’s keep going.”

Finally they came to a circular rockery with paths shooting off in two directions. Inside the circle grew a short, squat palm and green plants with wide split leaves, bordering orange, pink, and red flowers.

“This looks hopeful,” Alana said. “The dome must be down one of these paths.”

Nick looked to the left and noticed that the foliage was flattened in places as if a vehicle had recently driven down this path. “I vote we go this way.”

They quickened their pace, working their way around a pond covered with yellow-green lichen and wide lily pads. Palm fronds, gray moss and dead tree limbs leaned over the edges, making eerie shadows on

the surface.

“Look,” Nick said, pointing through a thicket of fan-shaped palm fronds. “Is that Rachel Mathews over there?” Mathews, but not Jack Frasier. Across the pond, almost hidden by the foliage, was a round concrete patio that hovered over the water.



A woman was gathering the cushions off of two chairs.

“That’s her,” Alana said.

Rachel Mathews was dressed in a long white garment of gauzy material that twisted around her legs in the wind. Nick squinted. At the edge of the patio lay a small log. Except it wasn’t a log.

Nick pointed. “Is that an alligator?”

Alana didn’t see it at first. “Probably, but don’t worry. It’s just a baby. It’ll stay away from us.”

“You sure?” If Jack Frasier was not a real person, how could Nick know the alligators here were really trained?

Alana frowned at him and spoke into her Teleguide. Across the pond Rachel lifted her wrist at the same time. “Ms. Mathews, it’s me, Alana Beeman. Nick Hammond and I are right over here.” She waved. “Can we come visit you?”

Rachel returned the wave, then reached down and picked up the alligator around the middle and tossed it into the pond. Just like that. With a splash it created a clean wake through the lichen and disappeared into a dam of debris that had fallen into the pond.

Nick recoiled at the thought of touching an alligator, but Alana seemed completely okay with it. "Come on," she said. "All clear."

He followed her the rest of the way, warily looking from side to side. At the end of the path was the domicile with walls of glass angling back on two sides, partially shaded by shiny, metal hoods. Like several domes combined, this home resembled a cluster of large white eggs. Similar to the Hammond's dome, except bigger, this was not the mansion Nick might have expected.

As they approached, he noticed a pad to the left of the dome where a helicopter was parked. Gray and saucer-shaped, it sat on three pods with blades that looked more like thin wings. And up close, Nick could see that a small motor was mounted on the tip of each rotor, rather than one big one on the craft itself. Did Rachel Mathews fly a helicopter? Maybe she did.

Beyond that, a yellow PM with a blue stripe peeked out from behind one section of the domicile.

"Getting ready for the rain, Ms Mathews?" Alana asked.

"Rachel," the woman corrected her. "It probably won't amount to much, but I don't want to get these cushions soaked. What brings you all the way out here?"

They descended three stone steps to the patio. Nick looked over the edge into dark water that slapped against supports somewhere underneath. No sign of the alligator now. If it was small, Alana was probably right—it was just a baby. But babies had mothers. Nick tried not to think about it.

"Well, actually...," Alana began, with a glance toward Nick, "we were looking for Jack Frasier. We thought maybe you'd know where we can find him." She introduced Nick.

Rachel picked up another cushion and added it to her armload. "Hello, Nick. I remember seeing you at orientation. How are you

doing?"

"Fine," Nick said, "I've been having a lot of conversations with Mr. Frasier."

"Oh, good for you."

Nick scanned the area for anyone else, but she did seem to be alone. Maybe she was actually the one in charge now. "He left in a hurry," he ventured, "but I need to ask him some more questions."

"I see," Mathews said. She motioned for them to follow her up to the domicile where she opened the lid on a long white box and dropped the cushions inside. "Well, you know, Mr. Frasier puts in a lot of hours. When he's off duty, he keeps to himself."

She was obviously putting them off. "Well, do you think he'd be willing to answer just a couple of questions?" Nick asked.

"I don't know," Mathews said. She closed the lid and latched it, then turned to face them with her arms folded across her chest. "He's pretty tired by the time he finishes work."

"We know, but it would just take a minute." The man doesn't even exist, Nick thought. How was she going to hide the fact? "We won't bother him again, I promise."

Alana shifted from one foot to the other. "It's just that we found out something. Tell her Nick."

Nick threw Alana a surprised look; he'd been planning to ease into this. Now he hesitated, considering what to do. When Rachel realized they knew about Jack Frasier, what would she do? Did Nick even care? It was clear that he had information he wasn't supposed to have, but now he felt forced to explain.

"It's about Mr. Frasier," Nick said, "the guy at the CD—I found out about him—that man is just a hologram." Nick waited for Rachel's reaction, still hoping she'd have a logical explanation. Like what? he wondered. Something that would prove that Venus was just what everyone thought it was.

"O-kay," Rachel said slowly, "I guess we'll have to make some adjustments."

Her business-like tone jarred Nick. He hadn't expected her

confession to be so blunt. “He kept repeating himself,” Nick told her, “especially when I asked him a question about myself.”

Rachel folded her hands in front of her. “Hm, that kind of thing is a challenge. We know how to incorporate happenings here in the city, but personal matters are something else.” She smiled, then pulled it back. “People rarely visit him more than once, so it hasn’t been a problem. Very good, Nick. Jack would be proud of you.”

Would be, not *will be*, Nick noted.

Now Alana looked pained. “There really is a Jack Frasier, isn’t there?” she asked. “I mean, I thought...”

“Of course, there is,” Rachel said. “Holographic images take on lives of their own. It’s programmed with Jack’s own voice and, of course, his own logic.”

She still hadn’t answered the question. Did he exist, really, in flesh and blood, or was the hologram just a fancy way to preserve his memory or something?

“But is he *alive*?” Nick asked.

Rachel laughed in girl-like giggle, throwing back her head. Then she turned toward their domicile. “Jack,” she called.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

From behind the curved wall an old man moved into view, as if he'd been watching them all along. Three fat raccoons followed. It was Jack Frasier, all right, but he was at least ninety years old! The man came toward them wearing a turquoise shirt rolled up at the sleeves and a brimmed hat dipping low over his eyes. Up close, Nick could see the deep wrinkles of his face, but his eyes were amazingly bright and blue.

The man thrust out his hand and Nick took it. "So, you found me out?" Frasier said. His lip twitched in a half smile. "You were the only one to keep going back with questions. I wondered if you'd show up here eventually."

Nick offered a weak laugh. He didn't know whether to be proud or embarrassed.

Alana reached down to pat one of the raccoons, then straightened to shake the man's hand. "I saw you so many times in Orientation. I can't believe I never noticed."

"The hologram is my way to be in two places at once, but apparently there are limitations."

"Jack is a hermit at heart," Rachel explained.

An awkward silence followed. Nick felt stiff. He had been friends, of sorts, with Frasier-the-hologram, but this man didn't even know him. Now he had a hundred questions, but this didn't seem like the right time to ask. Instead he scanned the area with its jungle thick with vine-draped trees and plants.

So this is the famous hideout, he thought. Why not a mansion? He turned to check the dome and the helipad next to it. Palm trees clattered in the wind thirty feet overhead. What a place, like a base on some tropical planet. Frasier's own home, far away from civilization.

Before Nick could finish his thought, the Teleguides delivered another storm alert.

Rachel shaded her eyes and looked upward. "Weather is the one thing Venus can't control. Not yet at least." A gust of wind raced across

the pond, knocking over one of the cushionless chairs. “You’d better follow me.” She started toward the dome, talking over her shoulder. “I’ll call your parents and tell them you’re staying for a while.”

“Thanks,” Nick said. He smiled in Alana’s direction. Lucky storm. Being from the Pacific Northwest, he wasn’t too worried about a little rain, but now he’d get to talk to the founder without the usual dismissals after five minutes.

Frasier hurried ahead and pushed open the door to their dome. He stood aside for them to enter. “We might get buffeted a little—the hurricane has turned inland.”

Now Nick remembered the white swirl on the holographic globe in the CD. Maybe he should have paid more attention.

“Don’t worry,” Rachel said. “It should be pretty weak by the time it gets here.”

A raccoon tried to follow them inside.

“Into your house, Tiki,” Frasier said. He reached down and nudged it toward a raccoon-sized tube along the side of the dome. “Our conversation area is in the back,” he said. “We’ll be comfortable there.”

He took off his hat and put it on a hook. With a dandelion puff of white hair, he looked completely different without his hat. For a moment Nick stared, then pulled his eyes away. The holographic man had never taken off his hat, and he looked so different with hair.

Straight ahead was one of the two walls of glass they had seen from the outside. Suspended on wires, design plans for machines and weird-looking buildings hung from the top of the dome. On a small shelf sat the apartment complex that Nick had seen under construction, and under that on another shelf was a model of a bridge made mostly of cables.

Rachel stepped aside to talk on her Teleguide. The others moved through a kitchen area—amazingly small, with a transparent bowl of a sink and an arched faucet. An apple lay on a tiny white cutting board. More like a capsule, the kitchen was fit with a round refrigerator and cubby holes for the coffee maker and a blender.

A moment later, Rachel joined them. “Alana, your mother is relieved to know you’re inside. It’s already raining out on Epsilon-

Eight.” Then to Nick, “Your mom and sister are safe in your dome. Your father is catching a night flight and will be in tomorrow morning, if the airport’s open.”

“Oh dear,” Alana said, and Nick knew what she meant. Not that his flight might be cancelled, but that it wouldn’t.

“Thanks,” Nick said, and he cringed. Nick was torn; call and hope he was in time to catch his father—and get Mom crying again—or let him make the trip for nothing.

Maybe Nick should have had more faith in Jack Frasier. He had to admit he was excited about seeing his dad, but how was he going to explain this? Would he feel as tricked as his mother had when they arrived in Venus?

They continued the tour, though it could hardly be called a tour, given that everything was so compact. Beyond the kitchen and a row of padded stools, a couch curved around a third of the inside perimeter. Cushions and pillows of all colors leaned against the back.

The usual menu table occupied the rounded space in front of it, and across from the table sat a simple, orange recliner chair. To the left in front of another glass wall was a desk with a row of books toward the back, a glowing globe, and a glass lamp leaning over the desktop. Computers, speakers, and a DVD player filled another space from the floor to the top of the dome.

Nick assumed Frasier would take a seat and start talking, but instead he said, “Would you like to see my workshop?”

“Sure,” Alana said.

“Really?” Nick asked. “You work here too?”

“Oh, yes,” Frasier answered. “I like having everything I need nearby. Like Rachel said, I’m not as social as you might think.”

With rain now pelting the round windows, the old man led them into a second section of the domicile where they stood along a workbench covered with more models of bridges, domes, and odd vehicles.



Nick stood under an arch and took it all in—table after table of white models the size of shoe boxes.

Along the back was a row of narrow shelves that held tiny bottles of paint. A silver model of a PM hung from the ceiling, and a small version of the Central Dome sat on top of a computer monitor. One end of the table supported a TV screen and several more computers. Tangles of gray cables lay everywhere.

On the opposite side of the dome, lined up neatly in front of another round bulge of window, were models of more apartment complexes and domiciles. One looked like a flattened egg with windows cutting across the front. Another seemed to be a park built in stacks of gardens, each one smaller than the one below it. Topping the park was a globe of the earth.

“Another hologram?” Nick asked, pointing it out.

“I hope to have three in Venus eventually,” Frasier said. He moved a tree made out of sponge closer to one of the models.

Alana commented on every structure while Nick walked along

quietly. He bent over to get an eye-level look at a tall building with a terrace, complete with four umbrella tables. Shiny Black windows rose up a half dozen stories to a penthouse on top. After a few minutes, Nick realized he was holding his breath, as if he were trying to hang onto the miniature fantasy.

Jack Frasier chattered on about the engineering features they were seeing, but Nick barely heard him. He was pretending to be a fraction of an inch high, able to walk among all the buildings in real life. He could see himself enter a complex of saucer-shaped apartments staggered along a tall central column. Each unit had its own patio with a miniature garden. He moved on to the sea models, mazes of domes floating on the ocean, displayed on blue-green plastic sheeting, wrinkled to look like water.

Nick wanted to touch the models, but he knew he shouldn't. Like a little kid, he folded his hands behind his back and walked along the work benches, examining every structure. "Are we going to have all these buildings in Venus eventually?"

"We already have most of them," Frasier said. "A few didn't work out. The models on this table will be constructed in a second city." He picked up a white clamshell of a building with tall windows filling in the opening. "This one's designed for an area that gets a lot of snow."

What if? Nick thought. What if the world really looked like this workshop some day? What an exciting idea; not just patched and rebuilt, but cities of completely new and better designs. "But what about the towns already there? What about the Empire State Building and the Space Needle?"

"Museums perhaps," Frasier said. "People may line up to look inside those old structures."

Nick couldn't imagine that, and he wasn't even sure he liked the idea. "But we're talking centuries, right?"

"It all depends on people," Rachel Mathews said. She had come into the model shop to join them. "It takes only a few months to build a city, if the machines are allowed to progress at maximum speed."

"Or someone could come up with a better idea," Frasier put in. It

was the same line his hologram had spoken. “Venus is just a start. A way to get people thinking.”

“Nothing is better than your designs, Jack.” Rachel assured him.

The man led the group back into the main part of the domicile where all four of them sat down on the curved couch. Rachel touched the menu table and produced a platter of cheeses, fruit, and tiny triangular crackers, plus four square glasses of a bubbly juice. Nick sipped it cautiously, expecting it to taste like liquid vitamins.

“This is good,” he said. “What is it?”

“Pure nutrient,” Rachel answered, “but it mimics the flavors of orange and a little coconut. You don’t have to worry about foods in Venus.”

Nick was so happy that he tuned out the wind outside where rain was hitting the windows steadily now.

Frasier took a slice of cheese, placed it on top of a cracker and said, “Help yourself. This cheese is nearly perfect, and not a single cow was involved.” He took a bite. Nick watched with interest.

Rachel handed him a napkin. “Jack, you’re dropping crumbs.”

Frasier brushed at his shirt. “Sorry.” He turned to Nick and Alana. “She’s always getting after me for something.”

Just like his parents. Nick shouldn’t have been surprised. People were always different inside their own houses. He wasn’t sure he wanted to think of them that way; he’d built Jack Frasier into a superhero in his mind. Not ninety years old, and not a hologram. But here Nick sat with him, huddled in a dome with the rain coming down. How lucky could he get?

As the group ate and talked, Nick watched the tops of the palm trees whipping in the wind, and black clouds boiling up to fill the frame of the window. He didn’t want the day to end, but he could see already that this didn’t look like the soft, wet storms in Skagit. Somehow, he and Alana needed to get home.

Obviously, Alana felt the same nervousness Nick did, the way she kept glancing up at the skylight every time a branch scratched the dome. What if Jack Frasier was wrong and domes were not as indestructible as

he'd claimed?

A half hour later, after all the cheese and crackers had been eaten, the Teleguides sounded again, the storm had strengthened unexpectedly and was going to roll over central Florida. Nick looked at Jack and Rachel for confirmation, but their expressions of alarm told him all he needed to know.

"This is not good," Rachel said. "We're going to get slammed, and soon."

"Don't worry," Frasier assured her, and turned to Nick. "Venus is foolproof. We have many systems in place..."

Trees bent, wind howled. Nick's attention was riveted on the huge round skylight in the top of the dome, where rain now poured down as if from a juice squeezer. The shell of the domicile quivered, and dark charcoal sky scudded by at race-car speed. Outside, a tree crashed through the foliage and dropped across the pond.

"Ooh," Rachel hollered. The Teleguides sounded again, and again, predicting wind speeds of 90 miles per hour, then 93 miles per hour."

"This is more than the Teleguides prepared us for. Jack, we'd better check out the warning system when this is over."

"No, it's working exactly as designed," Frasier said. "Nothing can predict the exact course of a storm. I'll have to work on that." He stood up and went to the tall windows. "But don't concern yourself. The domes will all be fine, just fine; I trust their construction."

Nick glanced in Alana's direction. With her hands folded in front of her chest, her usually sunny face was set in a grimace.

Frasier maintained his calm. "It'll be okay. Don't worry," he assured them again. Was he really reassuring himself?

Nick watched the top of the dome, wondering if it would split apart any moment. Several times he saw something sail by overhead, but he never heard it land. That meant the wind had been strong enough to carry it a long way.

For half an hour Nick, Alana, Jack Frasier and Rachel all sat quietly listening to the storm. If Frasier was having second thoughts about Venus, he wasn't letting on.

“I wonder about the Radials,” Nick said after a while. He couldn’t concentrate on anything but the rain pouring down the windows. And his father was soon to be on a plane, heading this way. He was going to be furious, having been lured across country for no reason.

“What if water gets in the tunnels?” Nick asked. He hoped he didn’t sound too wimpy in front of Alana, but this was getting serious. *Whomp.* A palm frond hit the glass and bounced away.

“We’ll be fine,” Frasier told them all. How could he be so unconcerned? “Nick, Alana, as long as you’re here, you must have things you’d like to discuss.”

Nick was sure he must too, but he couldn’t think what they were. Except this time it wasn’t because he was so in awe of the founder. This time all he could think about was being in a dome that could at any moment tip over and roll all the way to the ocean.

“Well,” Frasier said, “let me help you. You should at least understand what I’m all about.”

He was trying to distract them with his calm demeanor, but the truth suddenly dawned on Nick. Venus wasn’t a movie set; it was a real city, and real cities could be wiped off the map in one really bad storm. It didn’t matter than it hadn’t happened before, it was happening now.

“First let me tell you I have no desire to be president or a leader of any kind,” Frasier was saying. “I believe people can govern themselves with just a few guidelines, but it’s going to take a long time to make the transition. People believe they need leaders. And money. Have you gotten along okay without money, Nick?”

Nick pulled his eyes away from the windows. “Well, sure.” Of course, he thought, as long as he could have anything he wanted without paying for it. He wasn’t exactly doing without.

Frasier kept talking. “We’re building a sister city in Texas on the waterfront. It’s an enormous project, but the machines are up to it. You’ll see. We expect to have it completed in less than two months. All of the materials are supplied by individuals who will be residents of the new city.”

Nick nodded, though he got only half of what Frasier was telling

them. He was concentrating on the increasing roar as he watched the spines of the dome bow inward.

Then, without warning, a crack, followed by a splitting sound. Alana reared back as rain water sprayed her face. A smear of gray sky appeared through the gap in the top of the dome.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Nick and Alana jumped to their feet as if they were sitting on the same spring. Alana wiped at her face. Her hair, dark and wet, clung to her forehead.

Jack Frasier hardly moved. “It’s okay,” he said, “stand back.”

With a sound like an electric toothbrush, the foot-long opening near the skylight began to close like a zipper.

Rachel jumped up to get a better look.

“The area around the skylights is a shape memory alloy,” Frasier explained. “The material remembers its original configuration.”

Nick realized his mouth had opened. “I didn’t know there was such a thing.”

“Trust me,” Rachel said, “Jack thinks of everything.”

Then in a blink the dome fell into a gray darkness, and the hum of anything mechanical simply stopped. Nick’s mouth clamped shut. This was all too familiar, like the night he’d been out on the farm ring in the greenhouse.

“What’s going on?” Rachel gasped.

Frasier continued to look upward at what was still left of the hole, as if he thought this was just a momentary interruption. But it wasn’t. Rain came harder, wind slapped at the dome. Then with a crack, the gap opened further. “The redundancies should have kicked in by now. The master controls must be down,” he said, “but it’s impossible; they’re too well protected.”

Rachel ushered everyone toward the kitchen area. She handed Alana a towel and spoke into her Teleguide. “Report requested, all Venus systems.”

“No report available,” a male voice said. Jack Frasier seemed to stiffen.

Tony’s rats! Nick thought. But it couldn’t be—not in the middle of a storm? Something more must be at work.

The group huddled together and watched as water doused the inside of the dome in waves of spray, wetting the couch and the menu table.

Rain splattered the display shelves where Frasier's models were sitting. Rachel rushed to move them to a book case on the opposite side of the dome.

Nick checked his own Teleguide. He imagined smashed domes all over Venus, including Domicile 84. "Ann Hammond," he called into it. "Mom, is everything okay there?"

"We're okay, but a tree has fallen over the patio," she said. "The yard looks like one big pond. I hope no alligators come ashore." She said the dome was dark, but intact. "Stay where you are, Nick, okay?"

"Don't worry, I will."

Mr. and Mrs. Beeman reported that their dome was holding too.

Rachel tried again, calling for a general damage report. When the voice repeated, "No report available," she groaned.

"Obviously, the redundancies have been compromised," Frasier told them. For the first time, he looked worried, and that worried Nick too.

Lights, air conditioning, food delivery, the radial and transveyors... ? Without the ingenious systems, Venus was just an ordinary city with ordinary problems. The Teleguides were okay because they worked off of satellites.

Everyone waited while the rain sluiced down the inside walls of the dome.

Finally, Frasier announced, "Whatever has gone wrong, I suspect it's in Underground Venus. But it seems impossible..."

Nick remembered the day he and Tony had ventured down below—Tony had been so fascinated with the place. Now Nick felt responsible. Why hadn't he done something about Peyton Tralco long ago?

"Sir, I think I might know what's going on." He didn't name Tony, but it probably wasn't necessary. Anyone could guess that Tony had been encouraged by the first try with the rats and the wire, and he had gone back for another shot at causing trouble. Why he would want to do that was beyond Nick, but Tony had a lot of ideas that defied reason. Maybe he hadn't even known about the storm, especially since he was too stubborn to wear his Teleguide.

Frasier seemed to think about what Nick said. “It took years to build the databases.” He sounded tired. “If anyone gets to those, Venus will be in serious trouble.”

Rachel nodded while Nick’s heart lurched. It wasn’t just their city; it was his now too. There was no 911 system, no one to call—except Tony himself.

He spoke into his Teleguide. “Tony Tralco.” When no one answered, he repeated, “Tony Tralco.” He glanced in Rachel’s direction, her eyes dark with worry. “He’s not answering.” No surprise, Nick thought.

“Someone’s got to get to the CD!” he said. Someone, but who? Not Alana or Rachel Mathews. Not a ninety-year-old man.

“I’ll go,” Nick heard himself say. “I can make it; I have my Teleguide.” Maybe he could run back to the PM park—they would still be working—pull in near the CD and make his way from there.

“No, everyone’s staying right here,” Rachel insisted. “It’s too stormy, and it’ll be pitch black in another half hour.”

“She’s right, Nick.” Alana wrapped cold hands around his arm. “Venus isn’t a dangerous place, not really, but this scares me.”

Frasier agreed. “We’ll have to wait out the storm, Nick, then the two of us can go in the helicopter ...”

Yes, the helicopter. Nick hadn’t thought of that, and he brightened for more than one reason. No mud, no snakes, no alligators, and he wouldn’t have to go alone. Plus, he had wanted to take a ride in a Venus helicopter, though he hadn’t quite pictured *this*.

“We can get there quickly,” Frasier added, “once the storm blows over. Then I can manually reset the redundancy cycles.”

“Okay, good idea,” Nick said. So it was settled. He wasn’t worried about what they might find at the Central Dome, not yet at least.

Rain came down for several agonizing hours, rattling the domicile with each wind gust. More time for Tony to do his mischief. Peering out through one of the bubble windows, Nick could see that the nearby pond was full to the very edge, and the surface of the water had been blown clean of lichen, now piled in green sludge against a log.

“Don’t worry,” Frasier kept repeating. “Excess water in Venus is siphoned off, purified and stored for use later.”

Sure, when the systems are working, Nick thought. The rings of Venus were laid out in concentric belts of dominoes just waiting to be pushed over. If water wasn’t stored, the farm plants would die and the air conditioning system wouldn’t work; and if the air conditioning didn’t work...

Everything was interrelated so that if one thing failed, another could fail, until there was nothing left of the city at all. Nick was beginning to see how vulnerable they really were, especially if he was right and a jerk of a fourteen-year-old kid could flip a master switch.

Finally, after dark, the wind ceased and the rain slowed to a Seattle drizzle. The Teleguide announced that the storm had passed, but it gave them no hint as to the condition of Venus itself.

“It’s safe to go now,” Frasier announced, then told Rachel, “We’ll send back reports on the Teleguide all the way.”

“Okay,” Rachel said. “Alana and I will take notes and enter the data the minute we have power again.”

Frasier pushed his hat onto his head, opened the front door and looked around. Tiki poked his nose out of his pipe.

“Be careful,” Alana cautioned them from the doorway. Nick tried to smile but couldn’t. It had seemed like a dream living in Venus, but now he wondered if he was about to wake up to a nightmare.

The sheen of puddles, wet leaves, and mud was everywhere. Nick stepped into the ooze carefully and headed around to the side of the domicile where the helicopter was tethered.

Directing his Teleguide light, it was immediately apparent that they wouldn’t be going anywhere in the chopper. A tree had crashed right through one of its rotors. The top branches had smashed the glass on the PM too.

Frasier came up behind him but didn’t react at first.

“Now what?” Nick stood looking up at the bent rotor.

Frasier coughed, then with surprising calm reported, “Rachel, our transportation is gone; we’re going to need to design a portable hangar,

maybe a domed tektonite frame that drops down automatically when winds reach a certain speed.”

Then as an afterthought, “Or perhaps bars that come up out of the ground forming the frame. I’ll have to do some calculations.” He climbed onto a log to get a better look.

A re-design wasn’t going to help them now, Nick thought, frustrated. Was Jack Frasier just too unnerved to think clearly? “Sir, I’m going to make a run for the car park.” He was sure he could. “You can tell me what I have to do.”

“No, I’ll go with you,” Frasier insisted. “I’ve walked the route hundreds of times.”

Nick was about to tell the man he didn’t have to do that—he knew he could move faster alone—when Frasier jumped off the log. He was in surprisingly good shape for being so old, but as he hit the ground, his feet slid out from under him. Frasier fell backward, his head hitting the log and his hat landing beside him.

Nick tried to grab his arm, but it was too late. Jack Frasier lay against the log with a sleepy look on his face and one foot bent under him. He groaned in pain as Nick reached for him.

Rachel dashed around the dome with Alana behind her. “What happened? Oh, no, Jack!”

Frasier opened his eyes wide. “I’m okay, I’m okay,” he said, and he tried to get up. “Give me a hand here.”

Everyone pitched in and got him up on one foot. Then they dragged him, hopping and slipping his way back into the dome where he settled back onto his orange recliner.

“Does your head hurt?” Alana asked.

“No, no, it’s my ankle. Just a little twist.”

“It’s not *just a little twist*, Jack,” Rachel said, kneeling in front of him and checking his ankle. “You could have a broken bone.”

“Not a chance,” Frasier insisted. He sounded irritated at all the attention. “I’m as healthy and solid as a man half my age.”

They continued to argue. “It has nothing to do with health, Jack.” Rachel pulled over a stool and propped the injured foot on it.

Nick could see that it was already swollen. He looked around the wet dome. What else could go wrong? With Jack Frasier hurting, but they still had a problem: Nick's choices were to stay here with them, make his way home with Alana now that the storm had passed, or try for the Central Dome.

"Sir, I think I should go on to the CD alone," Nick said. "I'll just take a quick look around and let you know what's going on. Then you can tell me what we should do."

If it had been his mother, she would have forbidden him to go anywhere at night, in the dark, no matter how important it was. But in Venus things were different. Frasier would trust him to do this.

"I'm going," Nick repeated as if he expected someone to try to stop him. "If I can make it to the car park, I'll take a PM to the Central Dome."

Jack Frasier looked up at him and winced in pain. "Okay, son. It should be a simple enough matter—just go down below and do a manual reset of the redundancy cycles. I will guide you through the fixes."

Alana jumped up abruptly. "Then I'm going too," she announced. "I know Venus better than you do, Nick. You're going to need me."

"She has a point," Rachel said. "Let me get you a shirt, dear." She left and returned with a red-and-black flannel shirt, which Alana buttoned across her sundress. She rolled up the sleeves.

No one argued with the new plan, a quick mission to flip a few switches. How hard could that be?

"I'll have to stay here with Jack," Rachel told them. "Call at least every fifteen minutes, okay?"

They agreed, and Nick and Alana left quickly. A hundred feet beyond the dome, the area was completely dark. Stars spattered the sky with the Big Dipper hanging just above the trees ahead. The path was bumpier than Nick had noticed during daylight, and they needed the light from their Teleguides to show the way.

Overhead, a tall tree that had fallen against another one creaked, then fell further, finally landing with a thud near the trail. The two jumped out of the way as leafy branches bounced, then settled.

“I wonder if the apartment buildings survived,” Nick said. “And the new skyscraper. It must be up to a hundred stories by now.”

“I hope it isn’t all bad news,” Alana said. “I hope this is just a little storm damage, and nothing more.”

Nick knew that wasn’t the case, but he didn’t answer. His shoes were already heavy with mud and he had to concentrate to keep from slipping. Twice in the light beams they saw long, black shapes slither off the path as they approached. Nick glanced from side to side, watching for gators. Alana marched right along, as if that kind of threat didn’t occur to her.

Finally, the two reached the intersection at Theta Ring, Quadrant Four and scanned the area for damage.

“Oh, Nick,” Alana said, excited. “Every one of the domiciles survived. I was afraid there’d be broken glass and concrete lying everywhere.”

“Me too.” Nick reported in on the Teleguide. “Good news,” he said. “The domes out here look fine...” In the background Rachel cheered.

Directly above them loomed an oval-shaped domicile with a flat wall of glass across one end. A lawn chair floated in the swimming pool at its base. Debris littered the surface of the water, but the dome itself appeared untouched. A woman crossed an upstairs deck, waved to them and looked down into her yard below. Nick reported that too.

“Tell her the MAIRS will be along soon to tidy up,” Frasier instructed him.

Maybe, Nick thought, but he gave the woman the message. What would they do if the machines could no longer build or repair things? The mess from the storm was all around them—trees, shrubs, a bent bicycle and even an overturned Orcon, still glowing green. Everything seemed damaged, except the domes themselves.

When they got to the car park, Nick reported to Frasier again, “We can make it from here.”

“Remember your Teleguide. It may be all you have.” It was Rachel speaking, then Frasier added, “Don’t try to be a hero; we just need

a report.” His voice sounded shaky.

“Okay,” Nick said. “You ready?” he asked Alana who was looking uncertainly at the line of PMs. He remembered now that she had said they went too fast for her. He was the one in charge now, while Alana was the one who was scared. And everyone was counting on him. He just hoped he could count on himself.

Nick opened the top on the first PM they came to and Alana climbed in. He followed, with no intention of letting his mother know he wasn’t with Jack Frasier.

“Can we just go slow?” Alana pleaded, folding her knees into the vehicle. There was that bee again, stretching and wiggling with her leg.

“I don’t think so,” Nick said. “They seem to just go, depending on the terrain. It’s okay; you’ll see.”

“I don’t know,” Alana said, as if she hadn’t thought about the PM ride when she volunteered to go to the CD with Nick.

Nick spoke his name, the PM recognized his voice, and he asked for the correct location. The PM pulled out of the lot and onto the road.

Alana smiled at him uncertainly.

“Okay, here we go,” Nick said. The car picked up speed, whizzing around Theta Ring. “Hold on.” He saw a mound of debris in time to brace himself and warn Alana. “This feels a little weird.”

The PM rose up twenty feet to pass over what looked like a café umbrella caught in some tree limbs. Alana sucked in her breath and hung onto the side of her seat. “Ooh,” she moaned. “My stomach.”

“We’ll be there in a few minutes,” Nick assured her. Every pond below had swollen to twice its usual size, in some cases washing out bridges that spanned them.

Alana leaned forward carefully to look, bracing herself against the front panel as if she were afraid she’d fall out of the car.

When the PM finally floated gently back down to the ground and pulled in at the car park, Nick said, “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“No, I guess not.” Alana exhaled and worked her way out of the car.

Nick smiled to himself as he turned in the direction of the Central

Dome. It felt good to be the capable one for a change.

The ground everywhere was still wet, and puddles lay in every dip. A jumble of trees had fallen across the pathway.

“This way.” Alana took Nick by the hand and left the path to skirt around the downed trees. Nick let her lead the way now, forcing his eyes straight ahead.

From a long way off, they saw the Central Dome, with its white arms stretching out like a starfish in the middle of a clearing. The ring of palm trees around the dome was still in place, but other trees and shrubs littered the courtyard. No lights shone anywhere, except for the solar Orcons. Nick reported to Jack Frasier.

“You’ll need a code,” Frasier relayed. “The doors on the CD won’t open automatically. This one should be 001. I’ve never had to use it, but that’s it, I’m sure.”

“Oh, man,” Nick muttered. “I hope he’s right.”

He and Alana walked the rest of the way across the courtyard in the dark. Not a single person could be seen in any direction. Even the fountains had stopped and were only dripping water from the rain. Flowers had been swept out of their planters and littered the concrete walkways.

Nick swung his arm with the Teleguide beam as he walked, watching for critters that might have been washed out of a pond, but only a single frog hopped across their path.

“Okay, here we are,” Nick said into his Teleguide.

Alana searched around the big glass walls for the place where the code could be entered. “Here,” she said. “It’s 001, right?”

“Right,” Nick said. “We’re going in now,” he told Frasier.

The glass walls slid open, and Alana rushed through. Then she stopped abruptly and cried out “Oh, Nick. *Look!*”

In the center of the great dome, in the space that should have been occupied by the massive Earth hologram, lay a circle of computer terminals and screens, nothing more. The globe with all the seas and clouds and pinpoints of light had simply vanished, evaporated, as if movers had taken it away—just as Nick should have expected if he’d

thought about the complete implications of being without power.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Alana stood with her head back, sweeping her arm and Teleguide light from one side of the dome to the other, as if she were searching for the massive globe.

Nick stood beside her; he, too, looking upward at nothing. “The hologram of Jack Frasier’s won’t be in the OrientationCenter either. Not without power.”

They stood for a moment in silence, then Nick called Frasier again. “We’re in... and... uh,” he laughed, “pretty weird without the globe.”

“Yes... I should have warned you,” Frasier answered. “Is anyone around?” His voice still sounded shaky, and Nick pictured him sitting in his chair with an ice pack on his ankle.

Nick scanned the dome for any movement. “No, I don’t see anyone.” If Tony had been here, there was no sign of him now.

“Okay ... this is important. The Transveyors won’t be working either. You’ll have to locate the underground ramp.”

Nick had never noticed any ramp.

“I know it.” Alana pointed to the vacant space to the other side of the CD. “I’ve never been down there, but my dad showed me a door one time, behind the Transveyors.”

“Yes,” Frasier said, “that’s the one. Let me know if you see anyone, but don’t go down any deeper than Underground-One.”

“How many levels are there?” Nick asked. He and Alana looked at each other. Clearly, neither of them had guessed there were multiple levels underneath Venus.

“A few,” Frasier answered simply. That could mean *quite* a few, Nick thought. What level had he been on with Tony?

“Okay, we’re on our way,” Nick said, pointing his Teleguide into the darkness. He took the lead, making his way around the perimeter of the computer circle, shining his light on the floor.

Crossing the CD in a straight line would have been quicker now that the globe was gone, but that seemed like a bad idea. If the globe suddenly re-appeared, they might be trapped inside a hologram! Was that

even possible? Nick wondered.

“Here it is,” Alana said, when they had passed the bank of Transveyors. To the right, in the wall, just where she said it would be, was a garage-sized panel that exactly matched the wall.

Nick didn’t see it until Alana started feeling along a hair-thin crack. “That’s a door?” he asked. “It’s big enough for a tank!”

Alana ran her fingers along the panel, then knocked as if she expected someone to open it.

Nick spoke to Frasier. “We found it. Do we need another code?”

“You’ll have to push,” Frasier said. “Normally, it would recognize you, but without power you’ll have to push it inward far enough to slide it to the side.”

Nick and Alana both put their weight into pushing, while their Teleguides cast long cones of light diagonally across the walls. They managed to move the door only slightly, not surprising considering its size. Then with another *oomph*, they pushed the huge panel until it ground back a couple of inches, releasing a blue glow around the edges.

“Where’s this light coming from?” Nick wondered.

“Crystals maybe,” Alana guessed. “We use them in some of the nutrition centers too.”

The light looked ethereal, like something out of a vampire movie; only the mist and a couple of gravestones were missing to give Nick a real case of the creeps.

“Here, let’s see if we can slide this thing.” Nick laid his shoulder against the door, flattening his opposite palm against the panel. “Okay, on three.”

Alana joined him. “One, two, three...”

The blue light expanded and washed over them as the door slid to the side with surprising ease. Alana managed to keep her balance, but Nick tumbled into the open space. He got to his knees and squinted down a 15-foot-wide ramp of pebbled concrete. A few feet beyond the door, the ramp pitched steeply to the left and dropped out of sight.

Alana reached out a hand and helped him up. Together they searched around the opening.

Into his Teleguide, Nick reported, “Hey, I don’t see anything that looks like a reset.” No Tony either.

“Go a little further,” Frasier told them. “You’ll see a box near a second door.”

“Okay... this is really steep,” Nick said, bending his knees for the descent. They inched down and maneuvered around the blue-lit curve. Their footsteps, and even their breathing, seemed to echo in the concrete-lined tube.

“Here we are... oh, I see it.” Nick pointed out the box to Alana, a raised rectangular shape the size of a computer keyboard set into the concrete wall.

She rushed to the box and prodded it until a spring-loaded door slid upward out of the way. Inside were rows of beads in different colors. “Now what?” Alana asked.

“What do we do with these colored things?” Nick asked Frasier.

Instead of answering Frasier groaned. “Darn this ankle... Rachel, where did I put that jar of Ceejay?”

Rachel Mathews said something, a silence followed, then Frasier said. “Nick, you there?”

“I’m here.”

“Okay, it’s a color code. Listen carefully. It’s yellow-green-blue-blue-red.”

Nick looked at Alana. Neither of them had anything like a notebook. “Uh-huh. Yellow-green-blue-blue-red,” he repeated. Alana touched the correct beads.

“Violet-green-blue-violet-blue,” Frasier went on.

“Okay... got it.”

“Red-red-blue-yellow-violet. That’s it,” Fraiser said.

That was a lot of colors. Nick touched in the final sequence, but nothing happened at first. Then suddenly, every bead they had touched lit up in order, producing a musical tone. The song sounded at once like a military march and a greeting from an alien mother ship. The blue light all around them faded to a pale yellow, almost like natural sunlight.

Alana gasped with delight.

Frasier cheered, obviously reacting to what was going on at his location. “Oh-hoh, we’re back up! How are things looking there?”

“We’re on,” Nick reported. He felt his face split into a grin. All around them colored fiber optic points outlined shapes in the walls, shapes they hadn’t been able to see until now. Squares were outlined in green, rectangles in red... the shapes seemed to indicate more small doors.

“Good job,” Frasier congratulated them. “Looks like that’s it, you’re off duty. Just be careful of the storm damage on your way home. I need to ring off. The boss here says I have to go take care of my ankle.”

He didn’t seem concerned about what had happened to Venus or why. Whether Tony Tralco, or someone else, had caused the trouble.

“Thanks for letting us hole up during the storm,” Alana said into her Teleguide. She closed the door on the box by pulling down the little door panel.

“We’ll check on you tomorrow,” Nick added. “Bye.”

Frasier mumbled something about being in perfect shape by tomorrow, then he and Rachel were gone. Nick and Alana stood for several minutes, quietly enjoying the living colors and sounds of underground Venus. This was like a cosmic symphony expressed in colors. There were other sounds now too, almost lost in the music. Sounds more familiar, like grinding, whirring, and buzzing, drifting up from deeper within Venus.

Nick refocused his attention. “Hear that?” he asked. “It sounds mechanical.”

Alana listened. “Down there...” She pointed at the floor.

Frasier had warned them not to go to any other levels. Why? Nick wondered. Because they were dangerous? or because they were secret?

Alana swallowed visibly. “Well, I’ve lived here all this time, and I don’t know what’s under my own city.” Without hesitation, she went straight to the door. Alana, who didn’t acknowledge danger, except when it involved riding in a PM.

Nick was about to follow her when his Teleguide sounded again—not Frasier, but his mother this time. “Nick, the lights—everything is

back on now. Are you and Alana on your way home?"

"Uh," he answered, "we're helping Jack Frasier with something. I'm out at the CD. I'll be along in a few minutes, okay?"

"That's fine," she said. "Louise Beeman and I are having conversation." She sounded so Venusian. "See you soon."

"Okay." Nick turned back to the now open doorway, where Alana had already been recognized. The sounds were louder now, and Nick could see part way down another ramp, exactly like the first one.

Alana turned around and smiled her white smile at Nick. "Come on, we may as well check it out."

Nick followed her, deciding he might never get another opportunity like this one. The ramp corkscrewed down, down, down into the earth at the same steep angle. After the first turn, Nick's knees began to quiver with the effort of controlling his pace. They could have provided stairs, he thought. Around his nostrils, a slight breeze from some unseen system circulated the smells of sulfur and mold. And the temperature had dropped.

Alana pulled her shirt tightly around her. "Ooh, it's freezing down here."

Nick rubbed his arms, imagining the rough, cold rock of a mineshaft just beyond the shiny walls—with the whole city of Venus sitting on top of them!

Focusing on the ceiling grids above them, he whispered more to himself than to Alana, "I wonder how far down we are." And what if the lights went off again now? What if they were underground so far that even the Teleguides wouldn't work?

When they got to the bottom, they walked out onto a platform that formed the floor of a tunnel. Here the area expanded a hundred fold, the walls another grid pattern of shiny blue stone. Far above them, a network of bridges of some unknown purpose hung suspended from girders.

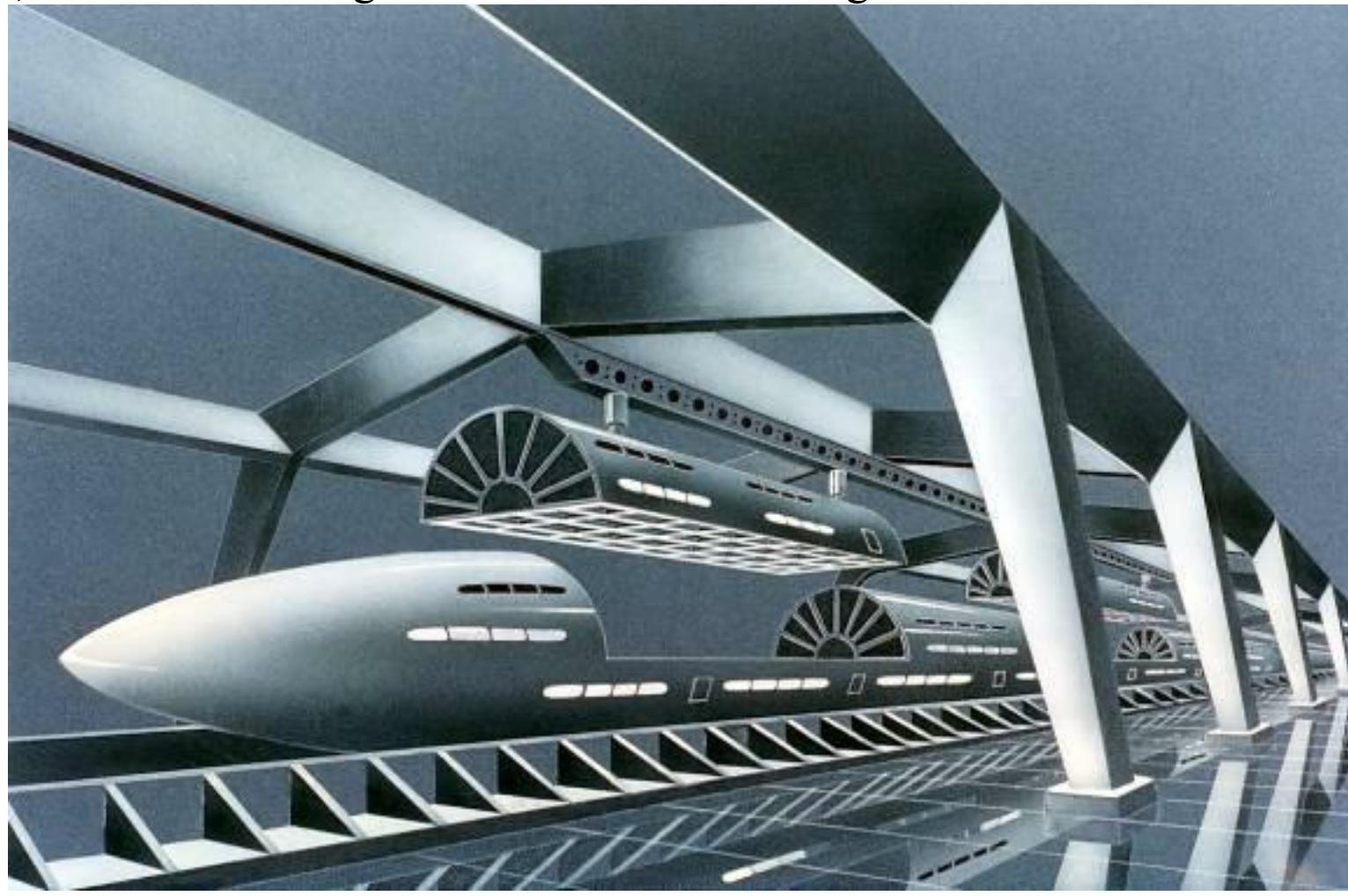
Before Nick could comment, a high-pitched roar, like a jet slicing through the atmosphere, grew increasingly louder, sucking at his eardrums.

Alana clapped her hands to the sides of her head and mouthed

something, looking upward toward the bridge. Just then, a bullet-shaped train came hurtling along the suspended structure.

Nick's pulse jumped. He had known the Radials ran underground, but with no windows to look out, he'd had no sense of the speed or of the path they took. Now he knew.

Was anyone on board? he wondered. There was no way to tell, but as he watched, an arm swung down, lifted out one section of the train, swiveled and sent it at exactly the same speed straight over their heads. Nick kept his eyes on the train, fighting the instinct to take cover against the wall. Then as quickly as it had appeared, the Radial was gone in a blur, the sound rushing to follow the train through another tunnel.



Nick laughed out loud with relief. "I wonder if that was our Number Four."

"I don't know, but there'll be another one along in a minute." Alana headed quickly for the door nearest them. It popped back, then slid smoothly to the side and she went through the open space.

Nick rushed through behind her. Another ramp. His legs were

getting tired of this, but he followed Alana down. On the way, he stopped to examine a large rectangle outlined in bright pink fiber optic points. Feeling along the edges, pushing and prodding, a door opened on a computer monitor showing a graphic representation of windmills that lit up as he touched each one. All of the blades were turning, some faster than others, and some of the windmills were in the process of changing their direction as well.

“We’d better not mess with those,” Alana warned. “I’m not sure how they’re controlled.”

She was right, but Nick was fascinated with everything he saw. “Let’s go down one more level, then look for a Transveyor to get us out of here.” The sulfur smell had changed to something else, something more organic, like pumpkin or banana bread. But the sounds, now that the Radial wasn’t drowning them out, had returned. Another few feet. Another wide floor.

“Ooh... !” Alana breathed, rubbing her thighs. “My legs.” She had stopped just short of another curve in the ramp.

Nick pulled up behind her and, after recovering for a moment, the two continued down the ramp and around the curve. Suddenly, they were looking out across a football field-sized hangar with a blue floor, shiny as a mirror.

“Oh-oh!” Nick exclaimed.

Before them and reflected in duplicate on the surface of the floor were thousands of Frasier’s robotic machines—the MAIRS—giant metal monsters, all wide awake and moving. Several of them were crawling slowly but steadily toward Nick and Alana.

“I think they’ve seen us!” Alana exclaimed. “If they can see, that is.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Nick took a step back. These things were just machines, weren't they?

Alana's hand was clapped to her chest—she was either scared or impressed, Nick couldn't tell which. The MAIRS kept coming, adjusting their path every few feet.

“Geez, you're right. I think they sense us.” Nick glanced behind him, looking for a way out. Running up endless ramps, trying to get away from machines that never got tired didn't seem like much of a plan. The only thing to do was melt into the walls. He pulled Alana back and watched, holding his breath in case they could hear sound.

Some of the MAIRS rolled on treads with cranes mounted on top. Others had so many arms pointing in different directions it was impossible to guess what their function might be. Still others seemed to be combinations of sections, as if they'd been constructed from giant Erector Sets—arms, hands, treads, cranes, booms.

Nick tried calling Jack Frasier, then Rachel. No answer. Then he tried Central Venus. “Hello, this is Nick Hammond. Alana Beeman and I are underground Venus. Can someone stop these MAIRS?”

The voice answered, “Multi-Access Industrial Robots are programmed to be 100% self directing...”

“Great,” Nick muttered. He hoped Alana didn't notice how jittery he was.

Beside him, she merely watched with interest. “I doubt if they're programmed to eat people. They don't even have mouths.”

“Well... programmed or not, they're big enough to mow down anyone who gets in their way.” Some had veered to the left or the right, as if they had other tasks in mind. One group seemed to be working on fellow machines, like monstrous baboons picking nits off of their mates. Others just kept coming. The closest one, a structure with an arm and a three-fingered claw, was the menacing size of a two-story house.

If Nick could have wished his way back to the courtyard, he would have. He no longer cared about Tony Tralco or why Venus had turned

off. Far above them was the remnant of a storm, and his dad was in the air heading for Florida. But all that seemed impossibly far away so many feet underground.

Nick shrank back further as the first of the group of machines marched within three feet of them. He looked up at mammoth treads, churning so smoothly along that the sound was more of a whoosh than a clank.

Then the machines formed a line and marched single file right past them and up the ramp Nick and Alana had just come down. No wonder there were no stairs, Nick thought. No wonder the doors were so big. Underground Venus had been built for robots, not people!

“I told you there was nothing to worry about,” Alana said calmly.

Nick could see that she was right. The MAIRS churned past until the last one had tilted itself to roll up the ramp. He looked with admiration at Alana, standing next to him. What an amazing girl she was with her pale hair, her bee tattoo, and her belief that Venus was perfect in every way.

He checked her profile, so close to his own face, and wondered if she had ever known a Paul-the-Neanderthal or a Tony Tralco, for that matter. He wondered how she would have dealt with either one. No wonder she was so brave and confident.

As if Alana knew he was studying her, she turned and smiled at him. Embarrassed, Nick smiled back, then turned to re-focus on underground Venus.

Now that the wave of robots had moved out of view, other sounds became apparent; clunking, whirling, and water flowing somewhere. Nick wondered how far down this *mine* went and what else they might find. Where were the Transveyors that would take them back up? It was clear now that they wouldn’t be able to use the ramps, now that it was rush hour for the MAIRS.

Nick was about to express his curiosity to Alana when she cocked her head.

“I hear something else.” She looked up at Nick with concerned eyes.

A long way off, someone was yelling. “Yeah, I hear it.” Nick’s first thought was of Tony, but the voice was too far away to tell. He turned a complete circle, looking for speakers or some other source of the sound. Was someone yelling at *them*? Could be, given that they weren’t supposed to be down here!

Seconds later, the yell turned into something else. Someone was screaming his head off!

Nick grabbed Alana’s hand. Without thinking, he ran with her toward the source of the sound. Whether someone were just hollering over the din, or in some kind of trouble, he couldn’t tell. They passed machine after machine, all of them the size of buildings, all of them busy in some task or other. Not one of them turned to acknowledge Nick or Alana, to Nick’s relief.

A quarter of a mile later and out of breath, they finally reached a break in the wall where a hallway veered off to the left. Here there were no machines, just a network of chutes growing out of the ceiling, curling in arcs and ending in dumpster-sized bins.

Nick looked up at wide, rubbery-looking slides, some carrying boxes, others moving garbage into bins or onto secondary chutes. A banana peel slid by, followed by bits of edible plates, lettuce, and a river of brown mush. Noise, like the rattle of a dishwasher, was now all around them.

Nick’s mind snapped back to the menu table in the LemonTreeNutritionCenter, where he’d first eaten with Mom and Erika—so this was where all that food went? Nick should have been repulsed, but it was far too interesting to pull his eyes away. Somewhere down here the laundry got processed too, and the food prepared.

“I don’t hear anyone now,” Alana noted.

“Yeah, it’s stopped.” Nick stood still, trying to direct his hearing through all the processes.

“I don’t see anyone either,” Alana said. “Maybe what we heard was just... I don’t know... something else.”

Nick was about to agree with her when he looked down. Not five feet from his shoe a rat ran across the floor. Not an ordinary gray rat, but

a white one.

Alana hollered and jumped out of the way.

“Tony!” Nick declared. “He’s gotta be down here somewhere.”

“You’re right!” Alana said. “The doors wouldn’t recognize anything as small as a mouse. Someone must have carried it in.”

A flash of anger at Tony nearly eliminated any concern for his well-being, but Nick knew he couldn’t ignore this. Frantically, he ducked under the nearest chute and skirted one of the huge bins.

“Over there!” Alana pointed.

Nick pushed another chute aside for a better look, tipping a plop of something greasy onto his arm. He brushed it off the best he could and wiped his hand on his pants. Then he saw it—the round rim of a hole, the size of a small swimming pool. The water inside it looked thick and black, and it was swirling.

“Geez,” Nick whispered.

“Tony!” Alana hollered.

“Tony! Hey, Tralco!” Surely he hadn’t been dumb enough to go near *that*, and maybe fall in. Nobody would be that dumb.

They approached cautiously, Nick fearing if they got too close they would get sucked inside.

Peering over the edge, it was obvious what the function was—it was spinning garbage, probably mixing it with something to break it down, and making it into fertilizer for Venus. Around and around and around it swirled, disappearing into a hole in the very center.

Nick leaned over an inch at a time, holding Alana back with one hand. Not all of the garbage was liquefied; some of it was still in large enough pieces to identify—part of a cantaloupe, a bar of soap, a chunk of cucumber.

And just inside the rim, clinging to the edge with his legs completely hidden in the dark ooze, was Tony Tralco, looking hideous—even his hair looked like it had been gelled.

Seeing Nick, he gathered his strength and yelled, “Get me outa here, you bozo!”

Nick flung himself to the ground. If Tony lost his grip he’d be

killed—sucked into the middle of this black mess and down through the whirlpool in the center, like motor oil going down a drain. Nick reached his left hand over the rim and connected with Tony's wrist, slimy and cold.

“Hold tight,” Nick screamed. The boy’s round face was twisted in torment, with red cheeks showing through dark goo. Nick felt fat fingers, and then a thumb sliding out of his grasp. He reached with his right hand. When that one slipped too, he renewed his grip with his left hand.

“Alana, shut it down!” Nick screamed. How she could do that, he didn’t know. Punch all the colored buttons again? The code in reverse? “See if you can shut it down, Alana!”

When she didn’t respond, Nick turned his head just in time to hear her yelp. One of the giant machines was advancing toward them, casting a shadow over their position. Alana sat on the floor leaning back on one elbow with her arm shielding her face. All Nick could see was ten-foot-high treads and metal arms reaching out, then retreating and reaching again like saw blades moving back and forth.

Tony whimpered something and Nick rolled to his left, scrambling with the soles of his shoes against concrete to keep from following Tony into the vortex. For one split second, he knew it would be easier to let go of Tony, but there was no way Nick Hammond could do such a thing. He tightened his grip, feeling Tony slip until all he was holding was the sleeve of his shirt.

At the same time, the machine advanced toward the side of the hole closest to Nick, its enormous treads and the baseball-sized bolts looming over him. Nick closed his eyes, bracing himself for being crushed underneath. Would it be painful, he wondered, or would he just die instantly?

Tony looked up at the metal monster and gasped, then pushed himself out of Nick’s clutch and let himself be swept into the circular motion alone.

Nick watched in disbelief. “You stupid idiot!” he screamed, then rolled out of the way, feeling sick and defeated—there was nothing he could do now.

Then in a great commotion of metal against metal, the machine stretched out its arms and, in a scooping motion, slipped its blades into the slush and under Tony's arms. The maneuver looked purposeful, as if it knew exactly what it was doing.

The MAIR swung Tony, dripping black muck, far to the side of the rim, beyond where Nick was now lying spent, and dropped him with a thud on the concrete floor.

Before Nick could consider how a machine would know to rescue a person, it rolled heavily back to its primary task near another group of similar machines. He half expected them to wave their appendages at each other and discuss what had just taken place, but they seemed just as oblivious as any construction equipment along the side of a freeway.

Tony, who seemed to finally realize he'd been saved, sat up and moaned. Alana rushed to him. "Are you all right? What were you doing in there? How did you get in?"

Tony wiped some of the sludge off his chin, then smiled lamely at Alana.

Nick scooted over to where Tony was sitting. He smelled like sauerkraut.

"I didn't do anything," Tony started, "I mean, I was going to, but then I decided to just let Leo chew a couple of wires. You know, like he did before."

"Uh-huh," Nick said. "That's what I figured."

Tony looked startled, like he hadn't heard his own words at first. "I meant... Leo just likes to chew wires, that's all. Rats do a lotta weird things."

Nick glanced at Alana who twisted her mouth in irritation.

"Look, everyone knows what he did before, okay?" Nick said.

"We want to know what he did *this* time." Alana wiped at her dress and moved away from Tony. "First we thought it was just the storm, but then Jack Frasier—"

"There was a storm?" Tony asked. "I know it started to rain a little bit."

"Not just a little bit," Nick told him. "It rained a lot. Venus is

practically gone," he exaggerated.

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is," Alana said.

"Well, it's not *my* fault. I just came down here; well, you know, I was *mad*, and when I get mad... Hey, I just came in to see if I could cause a little power failure. I didn't think the whole darn place would go ka-blooey."

Alana got to her feet and looked around. "Where are your rats, Tony? We can't leave them down here to cause more trouble."

"We saw one of them," Nick told him

"You did?" Tony looked from Nick to Alana as if that were the most wonderful news he'd ever heard. "I've got to get them back. I've put hundreds of hours into training those rats." Tony looked disgusting, covered with gunk so thick it didn't even drip. "I let em out, but they just ran off, so what could I do? I ran after 'em. This place goes clean into the middle of the earth, man."

When Tony saw that he was getting little sympathy, he added, "Hey, they could have babies. Then there would be a whole rat city down here by Christmas. It's true."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Alana leaned close to his face, and Tony pulled back. “Or,” she said, “we could just lock you down here with them.”

Nick wanted to laugh but he didn’t. “She’s right, so you’d better figure out a way to call them or something. Underground Venus is a really big place.”

“They usually just go back to their box,” Tony answered. “But I left it up on the main level.” He crossed his arms, as if he couldn’t decide whether to be scared or defiant. “I’m not going anywhere without my rats.”

Alana started to say something more, then apparently changed her mind. She paced a few feet away from them where she watched the machines working.

Nick looked from one side of the hanger to the other. The floor, the walls, the ceiling—everything appeared sterile and orderly, with nothing out of place. “You should have thought about your rats before you came up with this lame plan. They could have been flattened by a machine, or they’ve fallen into *that...*” Nick indicated the swirling pool twenty feet away from them.

Tony scooted back against the wall. “My dad’s probably gonna sue this place. No locks on the doors, no railings on anything. How was I supposed to know there was a *lake* right in the middle of the floor?”

“Stop it, Tony,” Alana said, coming close again. “How did you manage to fall in, anyway?”

“There are buttons everywhere and levers—I mean, who can tell how this place really works? I touched everything I could find. Then the lights went out. It’s *dark* down here, man. You can’t see a friggin’ thing.” Tony shuddered.

“There’s a light on your Teleguide, you know,” Nick reminded him. Except Tony never wore his.

Tony wrapped his arms around himself, shivering.

“We need to get out of here.” Alana pulled her flannel shirt tighter.

“Rats or not,” Nick said. Maybe they shouldn’t have gone below

the first level, though if they hadn't Tony might have rotted with all the garbage.

"Okay, okay." Tony got to his feet, grumbling. His pants stuck to him in shiny, dark ridges. As he stood there dressed in sludge-encrusted clothes, a white streak appeared out of nowhere. Nick and Alana both jumped.

"That's Leo!" Tony scooped up the rodent and held it under his chin, its pink tail wrapped around his wrist. The rat didn't seem to mind how Tony smelled. "Hey, guy, you came back." He sounded sweet as syrup.

For a moment Nick wondered if he was going to kiss the rat. Tony stroked its fur a few times, then held it in front of his face so he could look it in the eye.

"Okay, where's Sylvia?" he asked. Obviously, he could tell them apart.

No amount of looking turned up the second rat. It occurred to Nick that if the other one had an endless supply of garbage, she might not chew on wires, and with just one rat down here, there wouldn't be any babies. "Look, she's not going to starve to death. I say we get out of here for now. Maybe Jack Frasier can help us figure out what to do later. Any idea where the Transveyors are?" he asked Alana.

"No, but I know someone who does." Alana raised her wrist and spoke into her Teleguide.

"Your nearest Transveyor is located 17.2 feet to the left of your current position."

Tony held tight to Leo while the group rounded the corner to the left, passing rows of glass tubes where foods scuttled along. Other tubes delivered edible plates to the assembly line, but the process beyond that point happened out of sight.

"I'm hungry," Tony said, stopping to watch a square of Venus lasagna pass by.

"We've got to keep going," Nick pushed, "before something else goes wrong."

A single Transveyor served this level, and the three crowded in the moment it recognized them. Nick felt himself relax as the door closed them inside.

“Main Level!” Alana said with a sigh of success.

The car slid upward, quivered a little, then moved upward again for what felt like five minutes. Nick watched the Transveyor ceiling as if he expected to burst out of the underground into a star-filled sky and keep right on going.

Finally, the doors opened and Nick looked around, hearing an “Ahh” of relief come from his throat. Sure enough this was the main level. The holographic Earth turned slowly inside the circle of computers.

Nick and Alana stood looking up at it, but Tony didn’t even seem relieved to be up top again. He stroked Leo’s fur, complaining about how much his expertly-trained rats were worth, how he’d never be able to replace Sylvia.

That’s how it goes, Nick thought. Too bad. “That’s what you get for shutting down a city, especially during a hurricane. Okay, it wasn’t quite a hurricane, but it still did a lot of damage. It was an emergency, Tony—”

Tony was pointing toward the tall glass doors. “I told you I left it there.” Holding Leo against his chest, he rushed to pick up the metal box, then hoisted it to eye level. Alana and Nick were right behind him. Inside the box huddled the other rat.

“Hey, lookit here!” Tony chortled. “They always go back to the box. I told you so. See, everything is turning out okay.” He thrust Leo back into the carrier with Sylvia and shut the door. “I trained them to do that, you know.”

Nick leaned in and looked at two noses twitching at the screened window in the door. “Figures.” He was almost disappointed. This was too easy. Tony had caused all this trouble and was ending up with no greater punishment than dirty clothes.

Tony wiggled a finger through one of the holes in the box. “How

was I supposed to know where she went? It was black as ink in here after the lights went out.”

Alana peered at the box cautiously, holding her hands back as if she were afraid she might accidentally touch one of the rats. “Okay, look,” she said. “You need to lock their door, Tony, so they don’t get away. It’s going to take us a while to get home; there are trees down out there.”

Tony hooked the latch on the carrier, crooning to his rats. “Hey, Leo. Hey, Sylvia. We’re goin’ home now.” So far, he hadn’t apologized or even acknowledged his part in this whole fiasco.

The doors to the Central Dome slid open when they approached, but the courtyard, now bathed in light, was a sloppy mess of downed trees and plant debris. The fountains spewed their water as if nothing had happened, but leaves, twigs, flower petals, even bits of paper floated in the pools at the bottom.

Still, Nick was so happy to be outside in the warm night air that he threw up his arms and skipped out across the concrete. “All right! Look at this, Alana. Lights everywhere. Have you ever seen anything so beautiful? Check out that sky... and the stars...” Nick was in mid-air when he realized his foot was about to come down on something wide and black.

“Nick, watch out!” Alana yelled.

Nick twisted, then threw himself backward, landing on his butt eye level with his worst nightmare. The sight hardly had time to register—he leapt to his feet and scrambled to a planter five feet away, crouching behind it.

Nick peered out from behind the planter, his heart slamming so hard he could hardly breathe. Lying right there in the middle of the courtyard was an alligator big enough to fill John Daniel’s limo. Sitting on fat legs, it was encased in bumpy, black armor, with a tail powerful enough to knock over any man.

Nick could see just one eye, a half-open slit, but even at night, he could tell it was looking right at him. Nick tried to swallow past a dry throat, coughing instead. Why him? Why now after everything else that had happened?

“Let’s get out of here,” Alana said shakily. “Just give it a lot of room” She didn’t insist that it had been trained. “Walk slowly.”

Nick did exactly as she said, skirting wide around the planter. Alana did the same, but Tony held his ground. What’s he doing? Nick wondered. Then he could see by Tony’s expression that he was too terrified to move.

The alligator had moved its head, and was now fixing his stare on Tony and his rat carrier. Was it just a coincidence, or could the gator sense a snack inside?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

So many thoughts ran through Nick's mind that he couldn't settle on just one. How fast could alligators run? Did he dare take his eyes off it long enough to pick up a rock? What would Alana think of him if he cut loose with a primal scream? Everyone seemed frozen, waiting for the alligator to decide what to do with them.

In the absence of a single solid idea, Nick slowly raised his wrist. "This is Nick Hammond," he yelled at his Teleguide, "We're out here next to the Central Dome!"

"Warning!" answered the female voice, "Pulse rate high."

"No kidding!" Nick hollered back. He watched the animal slither toward them, dragging its tail back and forth. When it got to within five feet of Tony, it opened its big mouth and bellowed like a rusty engine.

All Nick saw was the roof of its cavernous mouth and rows of teeth the size of 'D' batteries. "Alligator, we've got an *alligator* staring us down here!"

Tony's eyes bulged, but he wouldn't move.

"Alligator," the Teleguide voice said, "A dangerous reptile indigenous to the southeastern United States."

At that, Nick reached into the planter and picked up pieces of concrete that had broken off. He threw them as hard as he could. He picked up the root ball of a plant and threw that too—it landed far short. He pulled off his Teleguide and pitched it at the gator. Alana started throwing things too. Tony just stood there, and so did the alligator, its mouth still open.

With nothing more to throw, Nick grabbed a small tree that had been ripped out of the ground. In one heave he swung it around and hurled it, leafy end first, in the general direction of the gator. The animal stepped back a pace and closed its mouth.

Nick didn't wait to see what would happen next. He grabbed Alana's arm and shouted at Tony, "Come ON! Run!"

All three of them bolted, including Tony, and crossed the courtyard in nothing flat. Nick heard Tony's rat carrier bump his leg all the way.

The group didn't stop until they got to the car park. Quickly, Nick scanned the area they had just crossed. "I don't see it," he breathed.

Relieved, they stood heaving for breath against the railing in front of the row of PMs. Sweat had washed white streaks down Tony's forehead and cheeks.

"Hey, man, I owe ya. I really owe ya." Tony hugged his rat carrier, patting the top of it at the same time. "I was so scared I couldn't move. I owe you big time."

If Nick wanted an apology this would have been a good time to ask for it, but he didn't. What was the point? Tony might be nice for now, but he'd probably change right back to the real Tony Tralco as soon as they got home.

Finally, they all got into cars, Tony in a gold one and Nick and Alana in a white one, and headed toward Epsilon Ring, Quadrant 8. It wasn't really Tony's stop, but he said he wanted to walk with them, to Nick's total surprise.

But that wasn't all.

As soon as the PMs opened at the Q-8 car park, Tony opened his bubble top and shouted. "Did you see all those trees? This must have been some storm. The igloos are still standing, though. Every single one of them is still planted where it's supposed to be."

His voice was high and excited. "They're still there! I woulda thought they'd just explode or something... *phoo!*" With his hands he demonstrated how a dome might explode. Tony had turned chatty now that he and his rats were out of danger.

"They're Jack Frasier's designs," Alana said, getting out of the car. She smiled her beautiful white smile at Nick, then the three of them started down the path.

Trees, green fruits, shrubs, and even Orcons lay everywhere, but the domes they passed seemed untouched. It was impossible to tell if they'd simply withstood the storm or if they'd repaired themselves like Rachel and Jack Frasier's domicile. Maybe both.

It was as if Tony's head was on a swivel, the way he jerked from side to side, checking out the domes. "What do you know?" he said. "I

can *not* believe it. These little eggs didn't even roll away. Frasier did something right, after all."

"Do you want to meet him?" Nick asked hopefully.

Tony eyed him for a moment, then hoisted his rat carrier into his arms and peeked in on Leo and Sylvia. It seemed like he was about to say something mean, but he didn't. "I guess I could," he said, sounding nicer than usual. "I suppose I owe you."

Dad's flight had been held over in Houston because of the storm in Florida. The latest schedule said he'd be in around noon. He woke everyone in Dome 84 at around midnight and Mom talked to him for a long time. Nick went back to sleep rather than talk to him. He didn't know how he was going to explain Jack Frasier. He hadn't even told his mother everything yet.

The next morning, the Tony that Nick met at the car park was smiling—and clean. He was even wearing decent clothes that weren't loaded down with cigarettes and other junk. It was a weird thing, but now that Tony had conceded this one inch and wasn't acting like a total jerk, Nick wondered if he could actually like him. Maybe he could.

Nick instructed the PM to take the two of them to Theta-Four. He loved the way the car moved out, hugged the curve around the rings, whizzing past the trees, buildings, and waterfalls of Venus.

"You can really see the damage now that it's morning," Nick noted. "But, look, there are construction machines everywhere. I didn't know we had this many, did you?"

"Well, they're self-replicating," Tony answered. "They've probably been popping little metal babies all night long."

Nick laughed. Tony wasn't as funny as Hank, but he did have an interesting way of saying things. When they arrived at Theta-Four, Nick pushed the bubble top back. The new day was sunny and humid, like Florida was supposed to be.

"It's a hike," he warned Tony, "but we should be able to make it in less than an hour if we push."

"An hour?" Tony groaned, and repeated "Okay, I owe you."

On the way, Nick had told him the truth about Jack Frasier—the hologram, and Tony commented, “I knew there was something weird about that guy.”

“No you didn’t, Tony. Come on, you only saw him once.”

“I’m telling you I thought he was weird from the very beginning.”

“You thought everyone was weird.”

“How much further?” Tony asked.

“Just keep going.” The ground was still squishy, and they lost the path twice, then found it again. “We gotta watch for gators,” Nick reminded him, though he could tell Tony was plenty wary this morning.

Nick rattled on about Venus and how important it was that the city worked out the way it was planned—all the things Frasier had said at Orientation, except Tony hadn’t been paying attention.

“I know I sound a little dramatic,” Nick said. He felt animated today, full of energy and even confident. “It’s just that I think Frasier is right about some things. The world needs a new way of operating.”

“Hey, no kidding. Isn’t that what I’ve been saying?”

“Well...” Not exactly, Nick thought. “My Dad’s proof,” he went on. “Here, help me move this tree limb.” They struggled to drag a six-inch branch to the side of the path. “He’s never happy,” he said, wiping his hands on his pants. “Pacific-Redi-Lawn is going to merge, and then it isn’t, and then it is again. You know what a merger is, right?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “I think I can grasp it.”

“It’s almost like he’s stuck between Venus and Skagit. But I can’t imagine going back to the real world any more, you know?” Nick asked. Tony didn’t answer.

“Maybe your dad will come visit. I’ll bet he will.”

“Maybe,” Tony said. He hitched up his pants. “Man, look at this. I’m losing weight for no reason. That read-out thing in the bathroom says I’m down to 170.”

“Are you even listening to what I’m saying?” Nick asked.

To Nick’s surprise, Jack Frasier himself answered the door when Nick knocked. He wasn’t even limping. “How are you Nick, Mr.

Tralco?" He knew who Tony was. "I told you I'd be fine by this morning."

Rachel Mathews came up from behind him. "It's that Ceejay. cream, Cosmic Jelly. It's one of the things I've been working on here in Venus."

"Really? That's fantastic. Where can we get some?"

"Just ask for it on your computer," Rachel said. "Be sure to keep it refrigerated."

Jack Frasier smiled, and smoothed his white hair. "I wasn't expecting to see you so soon. Come on in."

"I told you I'd come check on you."

"There was no need, but I'm glad to see you."

Nick had been trying to figure out how he would phrase his thoughts to the founder of a city. He would have to be careful; it wasn't as if Nick owned Venus, but after last night he felt like he knew Jack Frasier and knew how much he loved this city. But there was something that Nick, and Tony too, knew that Frasier might have forgotten; that there was a real world out there.

They all went into the conversation area and sat down. Frasier ordered lemonades all around. When the drinks showed up, each glass was sitting on a plate with a fat macaroon. Tony's eyes widened and he reached for his, probably thinking it was made out of the usual sugar and coconut, when in reality they were probably ninety percent vitamins and minerals.

Nick wasn't interested in food right now. He hoped Jack Frasier would listen to him. After his father started his business, Nick felt dumb talking to him, like they had nothing in common, never quite sure how to word things. So he'd simply stopped talking. But Venus was a place he cared about; finally, a place where Nick belonged.

Frasier took a drink of his lemonade. "Well, boys, you said you wanted to check up on me, but I have a feeling something else brings you here?"

Tony looked at Nick as if to say, *Yeah, what brings us here?*

"Well, I've been thinking...," Nick said. "Remember how you said

Venus would eventually have about 30,000 people living here? And that Venus is a resource-based society, based on materials instead of money?"

Frasier nodded.

"And you said that for now, a lot of the materials are donated?"

Frasier nodded again. "We're getting more self-sufficient all the time."

"Well..." He hesitated. Why was this so scary? Nick wondered. Why was his heart pounding this way? "You said Venus is an experiment and that someone might come up with better ideas," he hedged. "You said it's a city of the future."

"The future by design," Fraiser agreed. He didn't add his usual phrase, *Someday cities everywhere will be like this one.*

"But first Venus has to be able to survive on its own. Right?"

"Yes, of course," Frasier said. "At times it's been a struggle, but I'm optimistic."

"My idea," Nick said, "is that Venus is the most terrific city anywhere, but the problem is, it's sitting right in the middle of the real world."

Frasier looked at him blankly as if to say, So what?

"What I mean is the economy might collapse someday, but it hasn't collapsed *yet*. So, to end up where we want to be—with cities like this everywhere—we have to find a way to survive *right now*."

Frasier squirmed and crossed his legs, but at least he was listening.

"Sir, I was thinking... your dome design and free-form housing all over Venus survived last night's storm. But I'm hearing that a lot of regular houses outside Venus didn't. What if you sold your designs? For money. I'll bet people all over Florida would buy them."

Frasier waved his hand. "I've already offered them for free, but there were very few takers."

"Maybe you could advertise," Tony put in. He seemed to perk up as if this kind of talk got him excited. "Maybe we could get someone famous to live in one for a while."

Frasier just looked blankly at the boys. Was he shocked or just disappointed? Nick couldn't tell. Finally, he shook his head and

muttered one word. “Money, always money.” The word itself sounded dirty, as if he’d been without it for so long that he could no longer think in those terms.

Frasier stood up and walked with a perfectly normal gait to the wall of windows. Then he paced back toward the conversation area. The look on his face said, *Haven’t you been listening to my lectures? Haven’t you read my book?*

“The economy really is going to collapse, eventually,” Frasier insisted. He made his way across the space again, crossed his arms just like the hologram. Then he raised his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. “No one will have jobs, so there won’t be any way to buy anything, including domes. And we won’t need to advertise. The whole population will want to crowd into Venus, or someplace like it.”

Nick had known Frasier wouldn’t like his idea at first, but he was determined to explain the whole thing. “But if that happened, wouldn’t we need a lot more cities?”

“Very true,” Frasier conceded.

Rachel Mathews appeared again for a moment. “Jack, will you *please* sit down and put that foot up? Ceejay won’t help if you re-injure yourself.”

Frasier grumbled that he didn’t need to, but he did as he was told. Nick waited for him to get comfortable. “What if we got people to invest in The Venus Project?” Nick continued. “There could be stock and everything.”

“It could be great,” Tony cut in. “You could do an Initial Public Offering to raise money to start the company.” He glanced upward as if he could see 100-dollar bills floating there.

When Rachel stepped forward and started to protest, Nick said, “My idea would just be temporary. It would be good to have money for a while, wouldn’t it, until the city is finished and enough people are living here?” He realized he was arguing like a lawyer again, but he couldn’t help himself. Venus had to survive somehow, and he was pretty sure his idea could work.

“Okay... ,” Frasier said. Was he actually thinking it over?

Nick smiled, even though he had to admit that his logic was a little convoluted, going around and around like the Rings of Venus themselves. Using money to phase out money. It was a radical idea.

“What I’m thinking” Nick said, his thoughts coming faster, “is that it won’t help Venus if the city goes out of business before it even has a chance to prove itself. After the storm, a lot of people will like the idea of a company that builds domes, and they might be willing to invest.

“Then later, like maybe ten years, if the economy really does collapse, the Venus Project will be ready.” Nick’s heart pounded with the idea. He was right; he knew he was right. The real world and Venus, both existing at the same time.

Tony swallowed a bite of macaroon. “I’d invest,” he said through the crumbs.

Frasier rubbed his head. “I don’t know. It’s so contrary to our beliefs... but, maybe you’re right. Maybe people would be more behind us than I thought.”

Rachel interrupted. “I don’t know, Jack. It sounds like wishful thinking to me.”

“All of Venus is wishful thinking,” Frasier said, “And that hasn’t stopped us yet.”

Nick smiled. He leaned forward on the curved couch, feeling his blood pumping. “But it’s a pretty good idea, isn’t it? If people all over the world invested, you could build ten cities, a hundred of them, even the ones on the sea. In no time, all cities would be like this one, just the way you envisioned. And the only way people would lose money in the deal would be if the whole world economy collapsed. Then it wouldn’t matter anyway.”

At this Rachel said, “Jack, Mr. Hammond poses some interesting possibilities.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Later that day, Nick, Erika and Mom all met Dad at the entrance to Venus. Wearing jeans and a white shirt rolled up at the sleeves, he was carrying a shiny sports bag, slung over his shoulder. No limousine this time, the vehicle that delivered him was a white van, and three other people were with him—two adults and a little boy of about six.

Nick wondered what had happened to John Daniels now that Tony wasn't handing off goods any more. Probably nothing since no one had reported him.

"Someone will meet you just inside the entrance," Dad told the people. They looked smiley and excited, as if they were off on a vacation. They probably weren't expecting the storm damage.

When they were out of sight, Dad took a deep breath and hugged Mom, then Erika. Nick stood by, feeling that familiar nervousness until his father hugged him too.

"You know," Dad said. "I used to wonder why Venus didn't have a moving sidewalk out here, but now I know. There's something therapeutic about having to walk in nature a distance before technology takes over."

He patted his bag. "I brought what I could of our things—a few photos, games. That blue vase you made, Ann."

Nick was surprised at how insignificant that sounded now. He was glad to have his father back, for a little while at least.

As usual, Erika got right to the point. "Are you staying this time?" Mom stiffened.

"Well, we can talk about that," Dad said. Then he looked past Erika to Nick, as if he were acknowledging why he'd come back so suddenly. Would he be angry about making a trip for nothing?

"I've missed you," Dad said. "All of you." He draped his arm around Nick's shoulders, and another around Erika, and the four of them went back to Dome 84.

Here was Nick's opening: He began talking fast so his father couldn't interrupt until he was finished. He explained everything,

including the hologram and his proposal to get investors to finish Venus. His mother and Erika had already heard it.

“So there is a real Jack Frasier?” Dad asked. “On the flight out here, I thought about it, and I assumed there just had to be.”

“Yeah, there is,” Nick said, “and he’s just terrific, Dad. Wait till you meet him.”

“I still intend to go see him,” Dad said. “Way to go, Nick. I think you’re onto something with this investment idea. How did Frasier feel about it?”

“I think he likes it. At least, he’s open minded.”

“Make sure the shares aren’t more than eleven dollars,” Erika put in. How did she know what *shares* were? “I still have my quarters; I can invest them in Nick’s company.”

“Well, it won’t exactly be my company. Maybe this is something you could make money on, Dad?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Dad said, and he added something really surprising. “I’ve been thinking about the merger again. I don’t know why I ever wanted that company; I don’t even like paperwork and taxes and ordering supplies. I just wanted to be out on a big field of green grass, and I almost never got to do that.”

A strange sound came from his throat, as if he were choking back an emotional storm. “Anyway, it’s not money, but what money can *do* that’s important?”

Nick had figured that out a while ago in the stores in Venus.

His father gazed down at him with a look Nick had not seen before. “I always thought that brain of yours just needed the right environment, and it looks like I was right.”

Nick didn’t know what to say. Was that look respect, after almost fifteen years? “You didn’t think I was just lazy?”

“Well, that too,” his mother said with a laugh. She seemed positively jovial now that Dad was here and everyone was actually talking. “Your efforts were a little anemic, Nick.” She pushed her hair away from her face. “I figured you just needed a good tutor. I sure wasn’t expecting Venus.”

His parents had obviously been talking about him, worrying about him back in Skagit. But what next? Was his father going to stay or not? Could Gil Hammond ever be happy in Venus? And what about Pacific-Redi Lawn? He didn't exactly say he was planning to close it down.

When they reached Domicile 84, his father stood in the middle under the big, round skylight and looked up through the palm fronds at the blue sky. Then his eyes scanned the whole dome as if he were taking a mental inventory. He picked up Jack Frasier's book and flipped through it.

For a moment, Nick thought he was going to get emotional again, but he straightened and cleared his throat. "Um... what's for dinner?"

"Absolutely anything you want," Mom said.

A short time later, with the family settled around the menu table and dinner sitting before them, Dad said something else that surprised everyone. But maybe 'surprise' wasn't the right word. More like *shock*.

"You know, I feel like I'm ready for another change," Dad said, and he smiled like he had at times before when he was thinking about going to graduate school or buying a sod farm.

"Oh, Gill, please." Mom dropped her napkin and sat back. She wasn't smiling; her face was contorted into something between worry, anger and sadness. "I just can't do it again."

Erica's mouth had opened, waiting for what the next big *mis*-adventure might be. Nick felt himself sag. His mind raced to find the solution before his father could say any more. He was almost fifteen, almost old enough to make his own decisions legally. He'd come back to Venus the minute he could. There would still be plenty going on, he could still be part of the Big Plan for the city, not as good maybe, but better than just leaving.

Dad waved his hand. "No, wait," he said. "Let me finish. I can't leave my family—it's time to put down roots that go deeper than sod. What I've been thinking is that this dome is pretty small for a family of four." He let a wide smile slide across his face. "Why don't we see what we can do about designing a domicile that really fits us?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Four years later. Nick stood on the bluff overlooking the waterway of Venus, in front of the Hammond's multi-level dome. A white catamaran with long fins was just docking below with three people aboard.

“Hey, how’d it go?” Nick called in his loudest voice, but obviously no one heard him. His father had been to the CD to make a presentation. As chief botanist for the city of Venus, he had figured out how to produce a kind of lawn that yielded enough fertilizer for most of the food production on the farm ring.

Dad waved. Nick’s mother carried the computer that held the graphics she had produced for the presentation. Erika was with them, too, a svelte fifteen-year-old with long auburn hair. All of them were wearing body suits, which still looked a little strange on Dad. With no tie, it was hard to think of him as a professional. Nick would always be a jeans guy; he just didn’t feel right in a body suit, though he’d been known to wear one on a very hot day.

The three disembarked and moved into the elevator, then appeared again when doors opened at the top. Tucked under Mom’s other arm was a painting in a frame; they had apparently stopped at the Venus art library on the way home.

Nick repeated his question.

“It’s a go,” Dad said with an elated smile. He took the computer from Mom. “The machines start in the morning; strip the old sod and replace it with Hammond seed.”

“Wow, that’s great.” Nick laughed. “You know, Dad, you could get rich in Skagit with that seed.”

“Probably,” Dad agreed, “But I never would have gotten the funding to develop it in the first place.”

“Look what I got,” Erika interrupted. She indicated the stack of books in her arms.

Nick picked up the top one and read the title. “*The Secret Life of Plants.* Exciting.” It sounded boring. He and his father exchanged

indulgent smiles.

“Your sister’s going to follow in my footsteps,” he said, nudging her playfully. “Except she’s going to leave Venus to become a perfume plant diva—*Euphoria* by Erika.”

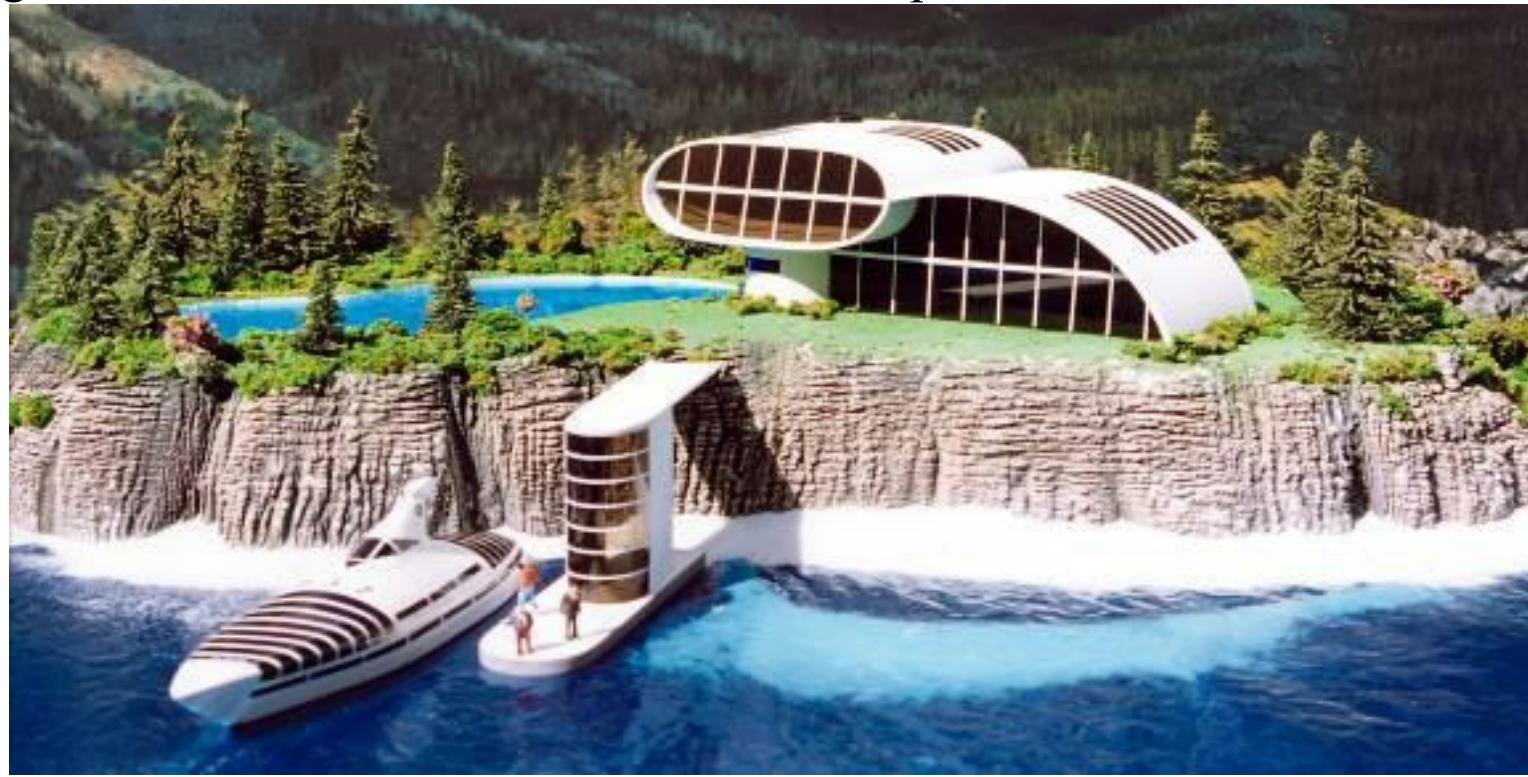
“Ha!” Erika shot back. “I don’t think so. Hey, can I have that philodendron from your room?” she asked Nick. “I need to hook up some electrodes and see if I can figure out what it’s thinking.”

Mom raised an eyebrow.

“Only if you don’t hurt it,” Nick answered. “I don’t want a traumatized plant coming after me.”

He followed the family into the house, a sunny open place with a transparent tube of an elevator in the very center. Nick never thought he’d live in a house as perfect as this one, but here they were.

First, they’d designed the domicile on the computer using a program that Jack Frasier himself had developed.



It asked questions about everyone’s habits and personalities and then printed out a floor plan. If they had disagreed with any of it, they could have entered changes, but the Hammonds had been so excited about the computer read-out that they had hit Submit, and a few days later the machines rolled onto the location they’d chosen on the waterway.

It was the most amazing thing Nick had ever seen—robot machines

in all kinds of configurations busily constructing their new home. He had ordered a box lunch from the menu table in the Hammond's dome, then took it to a rock ledge to watch with Tony.

Before he returned to Domicile 84 that night, the machines had created the rounded concrete siding and immense walls of a glass-like material facing the water, with a long deck off the second story.

The next morning, smaller robots completed the interior, and that night the family moved in. It was easy given that they didn't actually own many things—photographs, books, Mom's paintings, and Erika's old collection of quarters. Almost everything else could be borrowed anew, or it resided in computer files.

From the skylights on the second level, sun streamed into Mom's studio. Below, surrounded by palm trees, sprawled the swimming pool with an island in the middle.

The Hammonds had agreed that the new amazing house was okay; you couldn't give up all your material wants in four short years. Besides, this was the only way for Nick to have a design studio big enough for his drawing board and bank of specialized computers.

"Look at this, Nick," Mom said, it's by a new artist here in Venus." She removed one painting from where it hung suspended from the ceiling, and replaced it with the new one, an underwater scene.

"Hm, it looks wet," Nick said, tilting his head to see it sideways. "He's good."

"I think so too," Mom agreed. She gave it a swing. "And the colors change in the light."

"What have you got going today, Nick?" Dad plugged in his computer at the docking station, sat down and logged on.

"Not much," Nick answered. "Alana invited me over for the open house. I'll get to see their new apartment and Mom's painting in the lobby. You're invited too."

"I have a few things to finish up," Dad said. "Tell the Beemans we'll try to stop by later."

"Okay if I come?" Erika was already sprawled out on a red chaise with one of her books.

“Sure. Some of the other kids will be there too. Romi, Tony...”

“Good,” Mom said. “We saw Mrs. Tralco at the library. She said Peyton is a little tired of doing assessments underground. He wants to join a nanotechnology gathering and get into design work.”

“Yeah, I heard about that,” Nick answered. “He says he feels like a mushroom down there.”

Working in the bowels of Venus had not exactly been a punishment, but Jack Frasier had suggested that he convert his fascination for the workings under Venus into something useful. Frasier and the city residents had elected him UOM, Underground Operations Manager. He’d liked the job at first, being the one in charge, but anything gets tiresome after a while. Nick didn’t blame him for wanting a change.

Unlike Nick’s Dad, who had decided to stay in Venus after the big storm four years ago, Tony’s father had re-married and almost never came to visit except to check on his investments. Too bad, too, because he’d see that Tony was a new man. For one thing, he’d lost a ton of weight, and his dad hadn’t seen the finished product yet.

“I don’t know where it went,” Tony had said. “Frasier says my scan triggered foods made with gluco-something and chromium piccolinate. Coulda fooled me. I thought I was eating cookies.”

But the most amazing thing that had happened to Tony had to do with family—he had redefined the word.

“Family doesn’t have to be people you’re *related* to,” he’d said out of the blue one day. “Venus could be my family—everyone here. You could be my brother.”

Oh, brother, Nick had thought. Tony wasn’t going to hug him, was he? Luckily, the moment had passed, but Tony did seem a lot happier after that. And now they actually were friends.

“I’d better get going,” Nick said. He smiled in his mother’s direction. “Yes, I have my Teleguide.”

Nick jogged the perimeter of the domicile to the back where he had parked his new-generation Proximity Mechanized car—this one had a steering wheel that could override the car’s built-in system in certain emergency situations. He’d decided that at eighteen, maybe it would be a

good idea to learn to change oil and maintain a car—you never knew when you might be out in the real world again. So, he had chosen a PM of his own to keep right here at Domicile 1006. White with a black zap of a stripe the length of the car.

Nick opened the bubble top and got in. “VenusTower.” The car maneuvered out of the Hammond’s driveway and onto the road, then took off toward the center of Venus.

“Over,” he commanded the car, and it lifted up, tilted, and banked out over the city of domes and spirals, scores of ponds with fountains, walkways and bike paths. From there he could look down and see all eight of the rings, neatly populated with domiciles and apartment buildings. Nearly 27,000 people lived in Venus now, and he was on his way to see one of them.

The PM pulled in at the car park and Nick got out, then jogged the rest of the way to the massive front entrance of the apartment complex. In a semi-circle surrounding the structure, water tumbled over a ridge, creating Niagara-like falls. The sound was at once deafening and soothing.

Nick let his eyes follow the building upward, out of site. “Ten-thousand-two-hundred and eighty feet,” he whispered. “You did it, Jack Frasier!” At the highest level that he could make out, a cloud floated off one of the balconies.

A curved floor jutted out on the second level, dotted with brightly striped umbrellas and tables. Planters with palm trees and flowering shrubs separated the tables. Nick had purposely not visited the site since the basic structure had been completed. He had wanted to be surprised after the Beemans moved in. The first two mega-skyscrapers hadn’t worked out. This was the first proof-of-concept design that had been completed.

With a sprint and sense of excitement, Nick entered the building. The size of several football fields, the lobby floor stretched out in front of him like a round, black mirror. Tiny colored lights radiated outward from a central shaft that rose too far to see the top. A hundred or so other people were in the lobby, some seated in clusters of white couches, others

eating in the cafes or just walking around.

“Wow!” Nick exclaimed out loud. It was Jack’s design, all the way. He stood in the middle and turned a complete circle, taking it in and looking for his mother’s latest painting.

It took a while to find it, then there it was, hanging from invisible wires off to his right, as if it were hovering there. The canvas was almost entirely green, yellow-green at the bottom shading up to darker hues, like grass on a summer day.

What caught the eye, though, was the bottom of a bare foot as a boy walked across the lawn. In this perspective, the boy’s leg and then his back, shoulders and head were progressively smaller, as if they were getting further away.

Nick himself had posed for this painting. He loved the way the boy seemed to be in a hurry, maybe even running, along the rings of Venus. He felt a stab of pride—this was one of many paintings by Ann Hammond in the city now.

Nick moved on to the central shaft and looked over the choices. The building housed a concert hall, a virtual reality theater, ball courts, lecture halls and more than 10,500 apartments. Knowing how things generally worked in Venus, he approached one of the speaker panels and said, “Floor 407, Home 40716.”

A Transveyor door opened on the shaft to his left and he stepped in. Along the interior curve were padded benches in cobalt blue where several people were already sitting. One of them was Tony Tralco.

“Hey,” Tony said. He had grown taller than Nick and was muscular, with his shoulders bulging in his body suit. When Tony decided he liked Venus, he’d gotten into it all the way, including his clothes. A number of other people got on.

“Hey, I was hoping you’d be here. Pretty cool, huh?” Nick sat down next to him.

“This is so close to the CD—lucky Alana.”

Nick checked around him. “Nice Transveyor too.” Bright as day inside even though it was completely enclosed, the car moved up, up, up, seeming to take forever. Nick imagined his stomach dropping into his

shoes. But it was only a remembered response to heights. In fact, he experienced almost no sensation at all.

Finally, the Transveyor moved to the west side of the 407th floor, scooting sideways until it stopped opposite number 40716.

“Hi,” Alana called from the doorway. “The system told me you were on the way.” In an ice-blue body suit, tan face and pale eyes, Alana looked as perfect as ever. She had pinned her hair up with a comb. A girl named Sarei stood just behind her, grinning past Nick at Tony.

“This is the greatest,” Nick said. He meant the building, the new Transveyor design... everything.

Alana flashed a smile. He could tell that she was glad to see him. “Come on in. Wait till you see the view.”

Just inside the door, sheets of frothy water rippled down a panel of sand. Nick couldn’t resist reaching out a finger to touch it. This small bit of beach had been Erika’s idea. All of the Beeman’s friends had had a hand in the décor, his contribution being the invisible light source that cast a glow along the top of curved, grape-colored walls. Checking around, Nick decided this was quite possibly the most awesome home he had ever seen, and that included the Pinewood house where he had once lived.

Moving past the entryway, Nick saw Jack Frasier and Rachel Mathews right away. Michiyo and Romi were there too, as well as Alana’s parents. Everyone was standing at the wall of windows on the opposite side of the apartment, and Nick felt compelled to stride toward it too.

From four hundred and seven stories up, the Rings of Venus lay far below. PMs scooted along the roadways. Craft of varying designs, some of them elliptical like UFOs, flew along below them, circling the apartment complex and swooping away.

The group stood for a long time just taking it in, then seemingly at once, everyone moved to a side panel that opened up, displaying dozens of different foods. Then, one by one, they all drifted back to the windows, plates in hand. By then, Erika had arrived.

Jack Frasier positioned himself next to Nick and Alana. “I’ve been

thinking,” he said. “We’ve just completed our sixth city, and people are moving in. The investors are asking what’s next. I think it’s time to test some designs for a city on the sea.”

Nick’s heart lurched. Did Frasier know he’d been working on some designs of his own? He’d been fine-tuning a mariculture idea, in which fish and other forms of marine life could be grown to help feed people.

His design would permit the free flow of water and would be completely free of contaminants. He’d used one of Frasier’s designs but had gone a step further. Underneath, concrete structures resembling giant Wiffle balls would become homes for the growth of new coral. And the whole project would need new types of machines.

Nick held his breath. Finally, Frasier said, “Rachel showed me your ideas. My vision is to have a new city up and running within four months. Some species of fish are going to go extinct unless we do something. The time is right.”

Rachel Mathews was smiling at him. Alana wrapped her fingers around his arm. Marine life was her area of expertise, and she probably knew more about fish than anyone on the planet.

“What about it, Nick?” Frasier asked. “We could have you working next week. We’ll build the new city out on the coast, then haul it into place.”

What was he saying? That Nick would need to move to this new construction site? But he was only eighteen. He was still a kid. Wasn’t he?

“I think you’re the one to do this,” the man was saying. “Your designs are beautiful, as well as functional, and the machines you sketched look totally workable. Of course, we don’t know for sure yet; we’ll have to build prototypes.”

Suddenly, the whole apartment was abuzz with talk about the new city. Who could go, who would stay.

Nick’s parents showed up then, and Rachel Mathews explained the whole idea to them. From a distance, Nick could see his mother’s face fall and his father scanning the room for him.

Nick took Alana by the hand and went to join them. For just a

moment, he felt a stab of separation, as if he'd already left. He'd always been overprotected, and he'd hated it. But Venus had changed everything. Now he felt a little like a balloon without a string.

"It'll be a good assignment," Dad said. "And it'll give us an excuse to get out of Venus for a visit."

"Build a beautiful hotel," Mom added, and everyone laughed.

Nick was relieved when Frasier continued the discussion. "I'm just too old to be trying anything so new," he put in. "I'll be here in communication every step of the way, though. You can count on it."

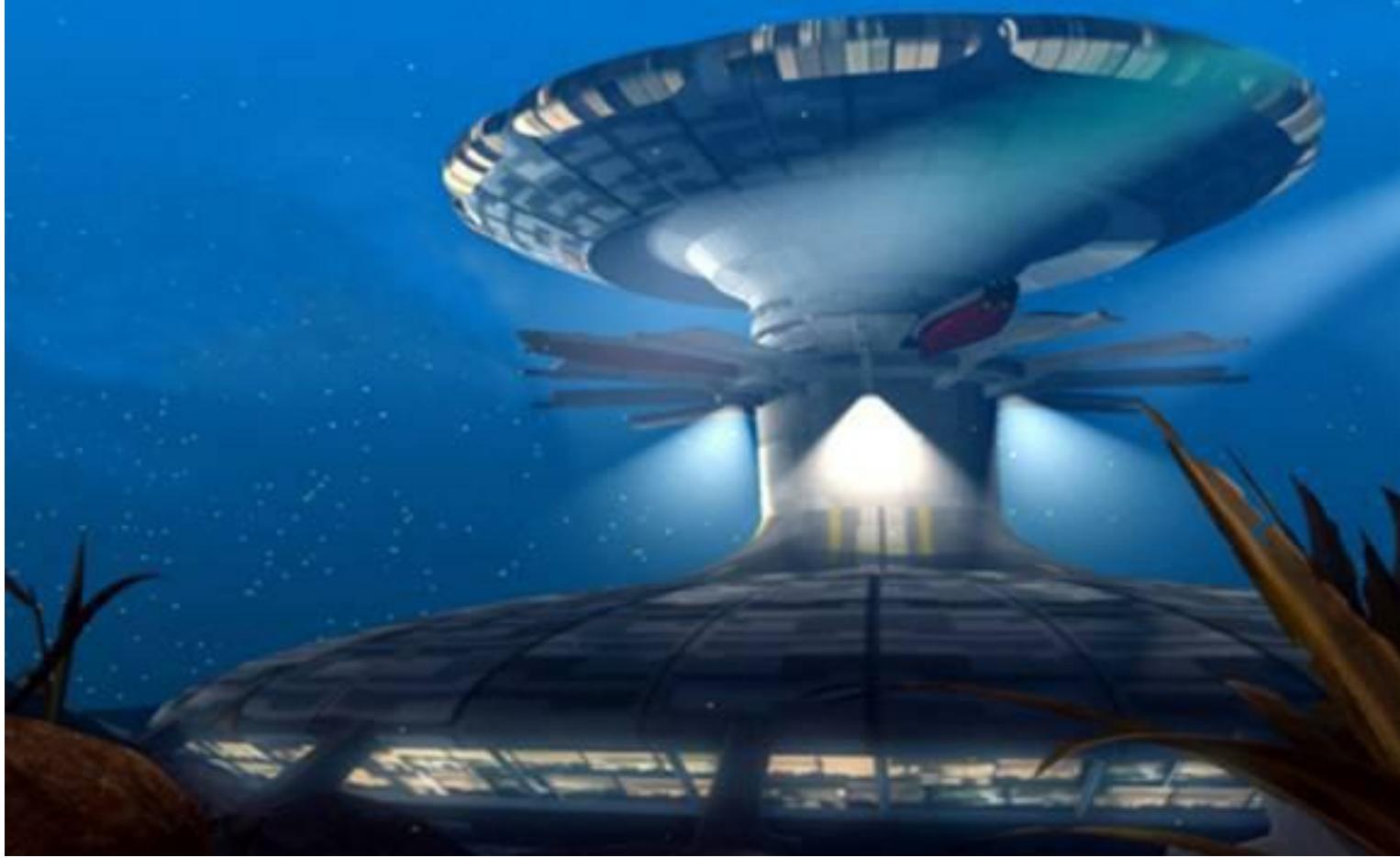
Nick wanted to be a part of this, but more important even than the city being a fishery, there was something that seemed more urgent. He hadn't even told his parents about it, so he was glad they were here to hear his big idea.

"Sir, there's one more thing. Did you get a chance to look at the last two sketches?"

"He certainly did," Rachel said. "Tell him, Jack."

"This city could be more; you were right about that." The look on Frasier's face was one of pure joy. "This structure could provide us with almost unlimited resources—oceanography, chemicals, fertilizers, minerals, metals, oil, natural gas, drinking water, ocean farming. And tidal and wind power."

A smile permeated Nick's whole being. The last part was what he'd been waiting for. Some scientists outside Venus had already been working on something similar, and he was sure his own ideas could be incorporated. He'd been thinking of a way to harness the Gulf Stream to generate electrical power.



“Let’s go to the design wall,” Frasier said and led him to a half wall that jutted out between the kitchen area and living room. When he switched it on, a glow from inside lighted the entire panel. Frasier began drawing with a stylus—swishes and circles to represent the underwater Gulf Stream.

For a while Nick forgot about everyone else in the apartment. “Sir, thirty million cubic meters of water per second rush past Miami. This is more than five times the combined flow of all the fresh water rivers in the world.”

“That’s right,” Frasier said. “If this potential energy were harnessed, I estimate that the project would be able to do the work of at least two large nuclear plants, without environmental contamination or radiation danger.”

“Then there are ocean winds, waves and currents with potential for electric power,” Nick added. He shifted to one foot, then the other. He could hardly stand still, thinking about the possibilities.

Erika had joined her friends, but Nick’s parents stood back to watch

and listen. They got it, Nick could tell. They could see how important this could be, and there would be a lot of conversation at the Hammond's domicile later.

Nick and Jack Frasier talked for over an hour. Nick had never felt so excited. Purpose, that's what he'd been missing before. And now he had it. A city on the sea. It would have a transport system, PMs, and domed living quarters. It would have paths for bikes and places for people to walk and eat meals together.

And his city would have great parks with trees, flowering plants, and lots and lots of grass! His father smiled when he heard that part.

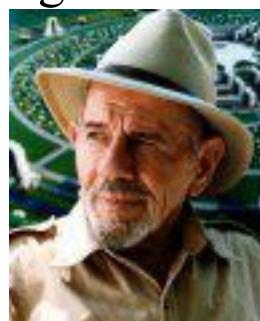
By the time Nick was ready to say goodbye to Alana, it was well past midnight. Everyone else had left, including Erika and his parents—her parents had gone to bed. They stood in front of the windows, looking down into Venus. The Central dome was well lit, though it looked like a star-shaped bit of confetti, and dots of light from scores of Orcans could be seen, even at this height. Nick remembered the day the Hammonds had arrived here, and how it had all seemed like another planet to them.

He told Alana what he was thinking. "Venus seemed pretty weird," he said. "But somehow I knew this was the place for me."

In the glow of the wall plasma, her face looked perfect and beautiful, like a model, only better because she was so real. "It was another planet in a way," she said.

Nick looked down at the city, his mind awash with all that had happened over the past four years, and the past few hours with Jack Frasier. There seemed to be no limit to what could be done here, and in all the other cities yet to be built.

Tonight Nick felt like he could step right through the glass, open his arms wide, and fly over the rings of Venus.



The End



The author (left) with Jacque Fresco and Roxanne Meadows at The Venus Project in Venus, Florida.

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The Venus Project is a real place, and the founders are real people. More than 35 years ago, futurist Jacque Fresco (Jack Frasier) and his partner Roxanne Meadows (Rachel Mathews) conceived of a city for the future, a place where life could be sustained on this planet, environmentally, economically, and socially. This city would be free from many of the problems we wrestle with today, a place where everyone could reach their full potential and finally be fulfilled and happy. To date, a dozen dome-shaped buildings carry out the functions of a new culture, but it's just the beginning. To learn more, log onto their website www.thevenusproject.com. There you will find the designs and theories presented in THE RINGS OF VENUS.

About the author

Pat McCord has been a writer for several Fortune-500 companies and the author of a handful of novels for juveniles. Her martial arts story, *A Bundle of Sticks*, was winner of the Mark Twain Award, the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award and the Washington State Governor's Award. Currently, she writes advertising copy for American companies. Pat lives in the desert of Tucson, Arizona, with her husband Bob. They have five grown children between them. For more information visit www.patriciamccord.com .